



Title of the article: Dance Connects: Exploring Dance as Education and Dance in Education within an Inter-Artistic Creative Space and Beyond

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Dance Connects: Exploring Dance as Education and Dance in Education within an Inter-Artistic Creative Space and Beyond

Abstract

Dance can be perceived and practiced as a significant tool of education. This paper explores moving body, or rather dancing body not merely as a form of entertainment enhancing the pleasure of the mind, but as a seminal vehicle for the dissemination of art and education connecting the individual to the socio-political and the environment in its pedagogic process. As a case study, it focuses on Tagore's school in Santiniketan (founded in 1901, later to be part of the Visva- Bharati university) as an experimental space for his larger visions of using dance and creativity as bridging the gap between not only mind and body, verbal and nonverbal, but further translating his larger visions into practice of relating performances to everyday-life-practices, liberal arts to the sciences, the fine arts to the crafts, and India to the rest of the world. It also investigates how dance can restore human life from false rationalizations of the society by reconnecting it with the free-flowing rhythm of nature.

Key words: Moving body, education, pedagogy, inter-artistic space, ecology

Biography

Deepshikha Ghosh has submitted her doctoral thesis on “Tagore’s Experiments in Dance: Art and Pedagogy in Santiniketan and Beyond” at Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi under the supervision of Prof. Urmimala Sarkar Munsri. She has done her Masters and Mphil in English from the Department of English, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. Growing up in Santiniketan, studying under the trees, learning music, dance, painting, pottery along with languages and sciences in Patha-Bhavana school and her love for both literature and dance have altogether made her realize the value of holistic education and nurtured this research interest within her. She has presented nationally and internationally on this topic.

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“In Santiniketan we provide our own entertainment, and we consider it a part of education to collaborate in perfecting beauty.” – Rabindranath Tagore¹

“Rabindrasangeet continues to challenge the imagination of contemporary choreographers, upcoming and established dancers which they rose to accept even during the pandemic.” -- Debanjali Biswas²

Introduction:

Dance can be perceived and practiced as an integral tool of education. This paper explores moving body, or rather dancing body not merely as a form of entertainment enhancing the pleasure of the mind, but as a seminal vehicle for the dissemination of art and education connecting the individual to the socio-political and the environment in its pedagogic process. As a case study, it particularly focuses on Rabindranath Tagore’s school in Santiniketan (founded in 1901, later to be part of the Visva- Bharati university) as an experimental space for his larger visions of using dance and creativity as bridging the gap between not only mind and body, verbal and nonverbal, but further translating Tagore’s larger visions into practice of relating the performances to the everyday life practices, liberal arts to the sciences, the fine arts to the crafts, and India to the rest of the world. When the entire nation history is being re-written by the new government policies and the New Education Policy of 2020 fleetingly mentions the importance of dance among the other

subjects of the so called multidisciplinary university curriculum and “education as means for character and nation building,”³ it is even more necessary to explore how and why did Tagore as early as in 1901 place so much importance on free bodily movements as an integral tool of holistic education he aimed at in his university space?

According to some critics Tagore Dance is a misleading phrase as Tagore did not invent any particular dance form. Some say it is based on his songs, his poetry and he had initiated this experiment; so it is *Rabindra Nritya* or Tagore Dance in the true sense of the term. The *Rabindra Nritya* course has been initiated for a couple of years within Sangit Bhavana (the performing arts department of Visva Bharati) in order “to bring about a better understanding for the future generation dancers” (according to Sruti Bandopadhyay, an eminent Manipuri dance practitioner and faculty of Sangit Bhavana). Amartya Mukhopadhyay, the other faculty member sees it potentially as a space for interactions, discussions, workshops and for training the new generation of Santiniketan in the unique Santiniketan style of *Rabindra Nritya* and uphold the legacy. Whether they will be successful in initiating new research and practice or will recede back to confining it within a fixed repertoire, only time will tell. However, whatever be its name or even if it is not at all necessary to debate on its

¹ Tagore writes in a personal letter to H. E. President Tai Chi Tao in 1940

² Writes in her recently published article (2023) “Roof/Room Pieces: An Ethnography of Lockdown Lives, and Digital Performances of Rabindranritya”.

³ Srivastava, R. (2020, 31 July). “The RSS Impact of New Education Policy”. India Today, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/new-education-policy-rss-sangh-pariva-r-impact-sanskrit-1706340-2020-07-31>

nomenclature, it is undeniably crucial to understand the philosophy behind this dance tradition or experiment on which serious scholarship has been very recent (by late twentieth and early twenty first century scholars Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, Aishika Chakravorty, Pallabi Chakraborty or Prarthana Purkayastha to mention few of them) although through practice and presentations it has had hundred years of its legacy and is still very much visible not only in Santiniketan but in every nook and corner of Bengal's living tradition and beyond. Discussions on Tagore's involvement with dance often start with 20s and 30s (formal dance training had started in 1919 with Manipuri dance teacher Buddhimanta Singh) and intensify around his dance dramas (*Notir Puja* 1926, *Chitrangada* 1936, *Chandalika* 1938, *Shyama* 1939) as the final culmination or fruits of his life long dance experiments. However, neither his dance dramas, specific dance productions nor his extensive travels within India and around the world which made his interactions with various acclaimed personalities and dance performances possible is topic of discussion in this piece of writing. This paper focuses on Tagore's initial engagement with movements and how he set it as a crucial pedagogical tool. I have always enjoyed literature and dance classes the most. Growing up in Santiniketan in my opinion, studying under the trees, learning dance, music, painting, pottery along with languages and sciences have altogether made me realize the value of holistic education and nurtured this research interest within me over the years. Therefore, exploring art and pedagogy of Tagore's experiments with dance as a tool of his philosophy

of education seemed an obvious research choice for me. Little did I realize at that point the challenge of investigating something without bias with which I have been integrally connected throughout life. However, I have integrated my muscle memory, my embodied knowledge as crucial materials in this research. It does not intend to present any detailed historiography, but based on his innumerable letters, lectures and essays on art, aesthetics, music, theatre and education traces some of the initial examples of informal dance experiments. Instead of sounding like a biography or a hagiography, the focus of this paper will be on the ongoing process, the innovative experiments with dance as education as well as dance in education within an inter-artistic space of an educational institution and how these free bodily movements were inspired by everyday life of this shared community space. Also, how can dance restore human life from false rationalizations of the society by reconnecting it with the free flows and rhythm of nature?

In the sixty years since the centenary celebrations of 1961 (Tagore was born in 1861), the world that had intimately inherited Rabindranath Tagore's legacy has undergone a radical transformation. What Tagore identified as the 'crisis in civilization' has deepened to the degree that humanity seems to be bent on exterminating itself and its environment. The threat of a pandemic and nuclear war, terrorism as a global menace, increasing intolerance of 'difference' and escalation of violence among communal and ethnic groups, the depletion of natural resources and other forms of environmental abuse has made us recognize a Rabindranath Tagore who is our

‘contemporary’⁴. Increasingly, scholars have been focusing on Tagore’s ideals of cosmopolitanism, sustainable social development and awareness of environment as well as his exploration of gender, the issues of nascent feminist potentials, of conjugality and masculinity, as they emerge in the context of narration of the nation. There is a recognition of the immense value of Tagore’s firm belief in communication between cultures, acceptance of difference, commitment to larger ethical causes and the stress on non-exploitative relations with Nature. This is not to provide an extensive and exhaustive list but to indicate to the changed context which shapes contemporary responses to Rabindranath Tagore. “Crisis in Civilization” was written in 1941, the final stroke in his literary endeavour, but he could envision this crisis much earlier in his life. He could feel how it would affect every facet of man’s life and culture and wanted to make his students, colleagues and people of India aware. One of the crucial facets was education. For Tagore, education was never only teaching or imparting knowledge but true education was when that knowledge was tested practically, that is, the students were able to apply the knowledge in real life, making sure that the knowledge was able to enhance their life, helping in their all-round development. This paper argues and explores how dance was an integral part of this education.

Locating Dance Experiments within the Cultural-Pedagogical Landscape of Santiniketan as a Tool of Education

“Children of the ‘Poet’s School’ were allowed to express themselves through tune and rhythm, lines and colour, and through dance and acting.” - Tagore⁵

This section of the paper emphasizes and analyzes dance as a bridging tool connecting the discourse and practice of Tagore’s thoughts on education. By selecting Tagore’s texts which specifically comprehend a total approach to art like “What is Art?”, “Art and Tradition”, “The Religion of an Artist” on one hand and his letters, lectures, and essays on education on the other, it reads them parallelly along with the more recent works of late twentieth or early twenty first century theorizing art and education. James H. Cousins in “Art and Education” takes aesthetic education as an “essential constituent of the child’s present and future environment.” Dance scholar Alma M. Hawkins discusses in her book *Modern Dance in Higher Education* (1982), that the “purpose of educational dance was not to produce dancers but to provide dance experiences that would assist many students in the art of living” as according to her and other dance critics like Martha B. Deane and Margaret H’Doubler the “development of the student as a total personality was of primary importance.” This writing not only relates Tagore’s philosophy of education as an all-round

⁴ The word ‘contemporary’ accommodates a paradox within itself. It can denote at the same time a form of temporal reciprocity as well as a temporal disconnection. Derived from Medieval Latin *contemporarius* (con, coming together + tempor, time), contemporary means being one in time, possibly of elements, otherwise belonging to separate spheres of existence. One can also be contemporaries across times. It

is in this sense that I believe it can be said that Tagore as a playwright or his ideas on theatre are perhaps more contemporary to us than to those belonging to his own era.

⁵ Supriyo Tagore, who was a teacher and a principal of Patha Bhavana Santiniketan for many years, writes in his article “The Poet’s School” (2010).

development of the student with these arguments but also engages with the concepts of dance as education, dance for education and dance in education. In this way it tries to understand not only the development of dance but also the politics behind its application as pedagogy in the new arena of his university system which was built as an alternative centre of Indian culture critiquing colonialism, hyper nationalism, orientalism and highlighting the ideas of humanism, internationalism, universalism bringing local and global within a single nest.

For Tagore, dance was not only an art aimed at pleasure, but of significant educational value. Along with music and drama, through dance and dance drama too Tagore sought to impart his educational ideas and the principles of knowledge creation. Whether it helps one to withstand the ordeals of life or not, but it is true that Tagore referred to the initial teachings of dance as a physical exercise with the accompaniment of music. One cannot disagree with the opinion of Avik Ghosh, former student and faculty of Patha-Bhavana, who has years of experience both in performing in and directing the drama of Tagore, that the dance Tagore innovated in and for Santiniketan goes a long way in shaping a person's individuality and promises to turn him or her into a more active and confident person in the struggles of life. It is especially because this dance has the capability of fulfilling the main ideal of education, namely to capture man's expression, free his soul from concealment and unite one with the other. In the "Thoughts on Education" he himself admitted, "I believed that the object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved

through the path of freedom." (5) For him freedom was not merely a sense of independence, but perfect freedom lay "in the perfect harmony of relationship which we realize in this world--- not through our response to it by *knowing* but in *being*" (The Centre of Indian Culture 469) and of course by doing. Dance acts as a catalyst in the expression of not only this freedom of mind, but also in the freedom of heart, will, and most importantly body. That is why Tagore placed so much importance on free bodily movements as a part of this entire process of complete being as well as an integral part of the holistic education that he aimed at in Santiniketan. This is one of the most significant reasons why in spite of not being a professional dancer himself Tagore can be seen as a visionary of modern dance in India. He had envisioned what after so many years' scholar Hawkins explains: "Modern dance as education achieves its most significant results through the growth of individuals--- growth resulting in more mature and effective behavior...The educator starts with the student and aims to shape dance experiences so that they contribute to the student's development as an individual." She also explains the importance of pedagogy of dance as education and dance in education the way Tagore had envisioned much earlier.

Tagore therefore envisioned dance pedagogy as a principal vehicle of carrying out his discourse of education. Like any other form of art, even dance cannot survive through mere imitation. When the rest of India was delving deep to unearth the rich tradition of Indian classical dance, Tagore, a believer in the spontaneity of physical movement to express the feelings and emotions of man, was

experimenting and searching for a new form, a new design, and a new technique for Indian dramatic art. Through the lyrics of songs and narratives of dance drama he tried fulfilling the holistic and humanist education of man. Moreover, by incorporating dance within the academic curriculum he aimed at initiating an alternative aesthetic of education which was not just emulation, but became a response to the West.

He wanted to save the sheer joy of knowledge from the rigid system of education. “The mind of our educated community has been brought up within the enclosure of the modern Indian educational system. It has grown as familiar to us as our own physical body, unconsciously giving rise in your mind to the belief that it can never be changed,” he expresses his concern in “The Centre of Indian Culture” (1919). Vehemently opposing unaltered rigid education system which paralyzes the mind and the body of the students or tutee, he had always voiced against the strict regimentation of body and mind and wanted to provide a healthy joyful teaching learning environment in his *ashrama*⁶. Dance was an integral part of this scenario. He believed that if the education of the body did not go on simultaneously with the education of the mind, the mind itself would not be properly stimulated. The reason why many students seem dull in class is that the claims of their bodies are not being met in their education. In his opinion every pupil of the *ashrama* should be proficient in some form or other of manual work. The chief object of this would not

be the manual training in itself but its real value was that through the exercise of physical skill, the mind also was filled with life and energy. Therefore, practical and physical training were also of great importance in accordance with his understanding of all-round holistic education. We find an example of this inseparable relation between body and mind in Tagore’s conversation with Leonard Elmhirst where he speaks of his granddaughter Pupe’s breaking into a complex dance in delight in seeing her grandfather after a long time. Tagore lamented that school system often suppressed such spontaneity. Elmhirst “was preparing to establish a school at Dartington in England and Tagore advised him on the importance of expressing thoughts and feelings in physical movements.” (O’Connell, 2009 p. 214) Not only regimentation but he was vocal against the standardization of the body as well. Every being, everybody is different. They may be parts of a whole but are distinct unique individuals. Just as every cell in the human body has a distinct life of its own and yet shares in the corporate life of the body, each human being has his uniqueness and is at the same time a part of the universal humanity. This is why he was against the classical’s fetish for fixed grammar. In classical known or somewhat fixed grammar is passed on through different bodies apparently to preserve and museumize its aura whereas he wanted to usher in new aesthetics blended with old, new movements tried by/on new, different bodies. In *Creative Unity* (1920-21) we hear him say that our modern education is

⁶ *Ashrama* refers to both the Hindu tradition of the stages of life as well as “a religious or spiritual retreat” (according to Merriam Webster dictionary) in a forest or somewhere away from the city. Even though Tagore founded his school away from the hustle and bustle of the city and also perhaps kept

tapovana ideal in mind, the most important characteristic of ashrama in Tagore’s philosophy was the essence of community living where students and teachers would live together and lead a common life practice with joy.

producing a habit of mind which is limiting our imagination, our freedom of thought and movement. Therefore, he created dance as a tool of education which would set one's thought and movement free. It would enable an embodied and experiential knowledge that is most intimately related to human perception. Dance expresses *bhav*, the deepest human emotions that can release the mind and body into a metaphysical space of aesthetic delight and freedom. Work and research on concepts like dance or movement therapy or kinesthetic⁷ learning have developed in recent years but he had founded the ground long ago. He left behind these ideas and grounds for us to further explore and apply in our education system, curriculum and life practices. He left behind openness and flexibility of mind, body and life practice.

Modernist Impulse in Creating an Inter-Artistic Pedagogic Space

“The art of dance expresses, first and foremost, the inchoate beauty of our body movements that mirror only the joy of rhythms... Our body bears the burden of all its limbs and is, in turn, propelled by their movements. When these two opposites coalesce with one another, the dance is born.” - Tagore⁸

“Interarts Studies” is an integral branch of the interdisciplinary nature of the humanities, which is “dominated by investigations into the interrelations of literature and the other arts, but increasingly also involved with aspects of

intermedial connections between the visual arts, music, dance, performance arts, theatre, film, and architecture, where the word plays only a subsidiary role, or none at all.” According to Claus Cleuver (“Interarts Studies. Concepts, Terms, Objectives”), it tends to still focus on “texts,” but a text which could be considered as a work of art. Aesthetic has always been a significant part of this study. However, once “medium” instead of “art” has become accepted as the basic category for the interdisciplinary discourse, “the interrelationship of the various media is conceived of as ‘intermediality’.” This is how this research area now understands the object of its investigations, rather than as “the interrelations of the arts.” If these are some of the current discussions around inter arts or inter medial theories in twentieth and twenty first century, Tagore’s vision of creating his institutional space with his cultural pedagogical agenda truly celebrates his modernist impulse and ingenuity. Throughout Asia and also in India the approach of learning nonverbal communication is through imitation. But the idea of dance Tagore thought of in Santiniketan demanded breaking away from mere imitation towards an infusion with some kind of an originality retaining the beauty and meaning of the performance or text.

Rabindranath perceived the entire universe as rhythmic, dynamic, each particle of which reflects its wish to dance (*visvatanute anu te anu te kape nrityer chaya*). And as an expression of this rhythmic world he wanted to create something that would be liberating from the formulaic

⁷ “Kinesthesia, also referred to as kinesthesia or kinesthetic sense, is the perception of body movements. It involves being able to detect changes in body position and movements.” According to <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-kinesthesia->

[2795309#:~:text=Kinesthesia%2C%20also%20referred%20to%20as,in%20body%20position%20and%20movements.](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-kinesthesia-2795309#:~:text=Kinesthesia%2C%20also%20referred%20to%20as,in%20body%20position%20and%20movements.)

⁸ Bannerjee, Utpal. 2011, pg 73

choreography which is the basis of classical Indian dance forms. I have argued elsewhere that he not only refashioned tradition but allowed original and individual creativity to permeate it. Assimilating the known with the unknown, he invented a novel cultural tradition while remaining true to his own spirit. He was neither a professional composer nor a well-trained dancer. But under the aegis of this thinker, seer, executive cum supervisor, the essences of the east and the west were infused within a new ethos of dance. His eagerness to develop a contemporary as well as cosmopolitan style of dance is evident from his restless search for dance languages from different parts of India, even across national boundaries. (Ghosh 2020) I have gathered as much from memoirs, accounts and interviews of former students of Santiniketan, notably Preeti Bhoumik (Anu di, who got the privilege of learning under the guidance of Tagore himself), Gitanjali Sircar and late Nilanjana Sen, all of them being ex-students of Santiniketan. On the one hand, Tagore encouraged his students to draw material from various classical sources (*Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri, Kattak*) and Indian folk cultures. On the other, he very much welcomed and incorporated South-Asian like *Kandyan*, Javanese dance styles along with some of European dance traditions like ballet and lacer citation. Sometimes pre-planned but mostly incidental, this principle of assimilation played a very significant role in the creation of this innovative dance aesthetic. How far was this successful? Is it still equally capable of representing the vibrant creativity of Indian culture or not is a different argument altogether? However, this modernist impulse is strongly proven in his

creating the scope for not only sports, play, different art forms at par with the so called academic studies but also creating a scope for both the genders to engage in these endeavors within the university space itself and beyond.

How through his dance works, especially content and form of dance drama productions Tagore was not only encouraging women of respectable Bengali house hold to come out on public stage against all odds but was constantly pushing the accepted boundaries of society and politics and proving himself as a seminal thinker of modern dance have been discussed in details in the works of dance practitioners and scholars like Manjusri Chaki Sircar, Ranjabati, Urmimala Sarkar Munsii, Aishika Chakravorty, Pallabi Chakraborty, Prarthana Purkayastha, or Utpal K. Bannerjee. “We could read this as Tagore’s withdrawal from what Partha Chatterjee (1993: 6) terms the ‘outer domain’ of political contest with the British Empire in India and an intentional self-location in the ‘inner domain’ of national culture. He played an instrumental role in modernising the Bengali language, was a prolific writer of Bengali novels and short stories, created the Bengali dance drama (*nritya-natya*) genre of performance and composed patriotic songs (both India and Bangladesh’s national anthems were composed by Tagore)” writes Purkayastha (2014, p. 24). Most importantly through this alternative pedagogy of dance he managed to create an awareness and acceptance among a large group of people who came in touch with him and his institution, about equal participation of both genders on stage. Not only on stage but bringing girls students in his school in Santiniketan was another significant

uncture in the inter-artistic space of Santiniketan. However, inclusion of girls and also parallel rural welfare work at villages demanded innovations in curriculum and pedagogy and so called co-curricular activities were very much part of the expanded and innovative curriculum of of Santiniketan. Kathleen M. O'Connell writes:

The girls participated in all the academic departments with the same courses as the male

students as well as in the physical education. They engaged in games, sports, hikes and excursion, and even the athletics of self-defense such as lathi play and ju-jutsu. The 1910 drama *Lakhir Puja* was staged and performed by female students. Tagore brought in dance teachers from Benares to train the girls and when they left, he personally taught them. (2011, p.138-39)



Women at Play. Photograph taken by Shambhu Saha. Photo Courtesy: Rabindra Bhavan Archive

The early students' memories and records reveal his active involvement in innovating the pedagogy of non-verbal language and how a group of teachers, notably led by the poet, significantly

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expanded the curricular vocabulary for non-verbal language pedagogy. The epithets--- 'extra-', 'co-' etc. in extra-curricular, co-curricular or co-

scholastic⁹ define a separation from the main curricular areas that are dominated by and expressed through coded- speech language. Radically, inclusion of non- speech in curricular framework does expand human possibilities of expression. And, this was practiced in a time when such non- speech languages were not structured pedagogically and/ or codified. This curricular position was argued by Nandalal Bose, not only a famous teacher of Kala-Bhavana but also an architect of structuring and codifying the pedagogic principles for non- speech language at Santiniketan: “Man is persuasion of Ananda, and knowledge- skills had innovated different means, in which [speech] language that is the basis for

Everyday life practices to free bodily movements and vice versa: Pedagogy of Body and Mind

“*Young children are restless all round; their bodies are restless and their minds are in sympathy with the body... a moving mind has more power to assimilate facts, to gather knowledge from the outside world... I have been trying to put into shape this idea of education, because as I have said, my theory is this: this movement, this constant movement, is absolutely necessary for the alertness of the mind which helps us in accepting facts and truth.*”¹³ - Tagore

Tagore must be one of the very few, if not the only dramatist, the major inspiration behind

communicating the discourse of literature, philosophy, and science among others. Man enjoys literature, but it is limited by its semantic resources. The limit is expanded by non- speech language resources like art and craft, music and dance. Man relates with the outside world, its empiric discourse and aesthetics through senses and thoughts and expresses through his creativity.”¹⁰

The training of the body¹¹ or various non-verbal practices in Santiniketan was not primarily for the purposes of either defence or competitive sports. Rather, the body in movement, *gati*¹² was directly linked to the very possibility of and the inherent desire for learning and imbibing.

whose writing came from his students and the teachers of his institution. The students, teachers, colleagues and *ashramites* (who ever lived within the *ashrama*) had accepted these plays and practices as an integral part of their everyday life experiences, joyful celebrations and occasions. They not only performed Tagore’s plays but performed plays written by other authors as well. This practice of performing together became intrinsically embedded within not only their education but their all-round development. It helped them express themselves in an artistic creative manner and more importantly this entire process of performance making, creating and presenting something together was itself an

⁹ Kothari Commission [Kothari Commission report, 1964-66, Ministry of Education, Govt of India, New Delhi, 1966] (1964-66) invited the area under a special bogey attached to the main curriculum as ‘extra- curricular’, later the nomenclature changed to ‘co- curricular’ in National Educational Policy- 1992 and lately cited in National Curricular Framework- 2005 as ‘co- scholastic’.

¹⁰ Basu, Nandalal. *Shikkhay Shilper Sthan*, Nandimukh Sansad, 1997.

¹¹ Even before the formal training of the body by different teachers this refers to the various informal nonverbal practices and movements in their everyday life.

¹² *Gati* means motion or momentum in English.

¹³ This extract is taken from the speech delivered at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore “to a large gathering of school children and teachers” where the keyword was ‘movement’.

extremely crucial lesson of Tagore's art and pedagogy in Santiniketan. To mention a few initial examples of the new performance pedagogy of Santiniketan, *Raja (The King of Dark Chamber)* was enacted in 1911 before an invited audience. Tagore himself essayed the part of Thakurda (grandfather), singing with children his own songs. Sita Devi, daughter of Ramananda Chatterjee who was the editor of the then most popular Bengali monthly *Prabashi*, wrote about this production in her memoir: "The boys sang beautifully. It was a treat to see the great Poet dance in the midst of them, as the grandfather. He danced extremely well" (Ghosh, 2010) The boys joined steps in *Sharodotsav* in 1911 but more systematically in 1919 during the second performance. The well-tuned boys fell in line circled the stage in step with the songs, holding in hand baskets of *kaash* and *shiuli* flowers. As regards to the other songs of the play, the boys endeavored to maintain the songs' rhythm in their footsteps and follow an unregulated style. In 1922, the play--- now called *Reenshodh*--- was staged a couple of times and the boys followed Tagore's direction to dance in rhythmic steps and catch the mood of the song. Under Tagore's personal instructions, the dancing steps for the Shonpanshus in *Achalayatan* (The Frozen Citadel, written in 1911-12, first enacted in 1914) were created and William Pearson, as one of the tribal characters, executed a dance in the so-called 'Western-style'. In *Falguni* (1915) little girls were to symbolize nature--- as river, the *champak* bower, flute, and so on. It is true that the play, with Tagore

himself dancing as the blind *baul*¹⁴, became extremely popular and was made memorable by the sketches of the poet drawn by Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Basu. In the performance of *giti natyas* (musical dramas) like *Balmiki Pratibha*, *Kalmrigaya* or *Mayar Khela*, (mostly during 1880s or 90s, Tagore's earlier days at Jorasanko Thakurbari¹⁵) an anticipation of a particular rhythmic dance-like movement of the body could be found. Such movements, which had a dance-like quality, even as it was not dance per se, would mostly serve as a solution to the problem of merging of singing with acting. Tagore would devise characters and situations in his plays to which dance would be integral along with natural bodily expressions. Thus song and dance were often constituted within the logic of the action and performance. In plays like *Sharodotsav* or *Phalguni*, the very festive mood of playfulness also made singing and dancing seem like logical actions. Spread over two decades, this era also helped to break the mental barriers in Santiniketan itself (especially between 1901 and 1919 and a little beyond) when dance was neither yet practiced as dance per say, nor was it officially included into the curriculum, yet free bodily movements expressing the mood of the songs and poetry were very much at play. These inter-artistic creative practices were assimilated with nature and everyday life within the movements.

Irrespective of gender or age, this principle of learning by doing was deeply embedded in the everyday life practices of the students in

¹⁴ "The Bauls are an ancient group of wandering minstrels from Bengal, who believe in simplicity in life and love...Bauls constitute both a syncretic religious sect of

troubadours and a musical tradition " According to <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baul>

¹⁵ The ancestral home of Tagore family, almost like a cultural hub in itself.

Santiniketan. The teachers and the students of the early years of Santiniketan recorded in their different accounts and memoirs how they performed every facet of daily work along with regular classes in the morning and afternoon, and these classes combined a wide range of activities, pursuit of knowledge and enjoyment. As mentioned before, students were to engage themselves in various forms of physical exercises, games, and of course, dance or dance like movements. Decorations for the various festivals and observances at Santiniketan depended entirely on the students. Through these daily routines of the students therefore we can see how the constant *chorcha* or practice of both mind and body was an extremely important part of the everyday life. These innovative yet simple practical experiments were also strengthening the foreground for welcoming dance along with already existing art forms such as music and drama (though not in a structured form till then) as a significant tool of this holistic ideal of education. Coming back to Hawkins's explanation in *Modern Dance in Higher Education*:

Modern dance as education achieves its most significant results through the growth of individuals--- growth resulting in more mature and effective behavior... The educator starts with the student and aims to shape dance experiences so that they contribute to the student's development as an individual; but throughout this process he constantly strives to help the student enlarge his understanding of dance as an art form and become increasingly proficient in technique and creative expression. Dance, then, becomes a means for student development, not an end in itself. (1982, p. 37)

It thus justifies dance's significance as an integral core of our existence. Tagore may not ever follow or show interest in constructing a specific grammar for his ideas of dance but from the very beginning he made sure of embedding free bodily movements within the everyday life practices and vice versa. Not confining within the limitation of bookish knowledge he encouraged his students to search for rhythm in music, in nature, in everyday life and enrich their quality of life with these intimate learning processes. He was not a professional dancer and did not have a clear end goal or idea as far as the dance was concerned, yet he had the courage and immense enthusiasm in understanding and experimenting with the new bodies and bringing classroom in a different kind of everyday. He never rejected the tradition yet always tried to move beyond rigidity towards flexible innovations. Even without consciously realizing it, as a modern expressionist dancer he always encouraged assimilation of different forms and movements which will help expressing the true emotions of the moving bodies. Be it poetry, music, free bodily movements or daily life routine, students were always inspired to look out of window towards the vastness of nature, towards the rhythms of life. He embraced the local and the global with open arms to build the institution in such a manner where art will not be celebrated as only art but will become art for life, the life which celebrates beauty, joy, the holistic living. This motivation in using bodily movements as part of his holistic understanding of education seems to have been the experience and expression of freedom. He felt a sense of immense joy in bringing

the mind and body together and exploring emotions and feelings (*bhav* in Bengali, thus the name *bhava-nritya* of this kind of dance) through music, poetry, dance and drama. It is unique how he did not only encourage others but himself took part in every spectrum of this joyous journey:

I am the messenger of the many- splendoured. I dance and make others dance; I laugh and make others laugh; I sing; I paint. Cadences from the

Ever- Playful One reverberates within these children through song and dance --- my entity and utility lie entirely in having their minds triggered in this joyous resonance. (2011, Banerjee 72)

This practice does not only connect the individual with the socio-political, but is incomplete without its connection with nature, the environment.



Dance Rehearsal/ Class with Girl Students of Santiniketan (c.1960). Photograph by S. P. Govande. Photo Courtesy: Rabindra Bhavan Archive.

***The Quivering Shadow of Dance*¹⁶: Connecting the Community, the Environment, the Aesthetic and the Pedagogic**

“Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God’s creation, becomes, under the tyranny of a prolific greed, like an over-laden market-cart jolting and creaking on the road that leads from things to the Nothing, tearing ugly ruts across the green life till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity on the wayside reaching nowhere.” ---Tagore, “Civilization and Progress” (1925)

Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May express grave concern in the introduction to their edited book on Performance and ecology that:

The terms we join together in the title of this volume—“performance” and “ecology”—do not easily or readily share space together, either materially or ontologically... Despite the fact that ecological degradation will likely precipitate enormous social and political upheaval in the next century, and, with it, unpredictable and unimaginable effects on human communities and cultures—the kinds of concerns that have traditionally been prime subjects for the performing arts—theater scholars and practitioners have been slow to engage environmental issues. (2012, p. 3-20)

Tagore definitely proved to be an exception. According to him (“Personality”, 1917)

“our individual minds are the strings which catch the rhythmic vibrations of this universal mind and respond in music of space and time.” In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1921) Tagore clearly stated regarding Santiniketan, “My object in starting this institution was to give the children of men full freedom of joy, of life and of communion with nature.” (Mukhopadhyay and Sen, 2012, p. 336). Throughout his life Tagore celebrated the unity that binds a man to society and to the cosmos. In Tagore’s view, man is an integral part of his natural habitat, his environment. Environment is what man shares with all other living entities: hence the surrounding trees, plants, flowers, mountains, rain-clouds and even distant stars and galaxies reveal a certain kinship with man. Therefore, when man oversteps the boundaries that nature and his environment have put around him, the same nature will in some way exact the price. Long before he actually brought in the formal training of dance in Santiniketan or experimented with more structured form of dance drama, through his songs and poetry somewhere he was making his students aware of the elements of dance in nature. Phrases like “such a splash of color gets life at the rhythmic collision of black and white” (*sada kalor dwande je oi chande nanan rong jage*)¹⁷ or “dance of the winter wind at the branches of *amlaki*” (*sheeter hawar laglo nachon amlokir oi dale dale*) clearly show Tagore’s aim of delivering ecological or environmental education through descriptions of the beauty of nature. In 1901 itself he writes *Naibedyo*’s poem 26 (the same year when he is also

¹⁶ Quivering shadow of dance in each particle of universe is my translation of Tagore’s phrase in Bengali *viswa tanu te anu te anu te kape nrityer chhaya*.

¹⁷ Translations are mine if not stated otherwise.

writing “Nation Ki” or “What is Nation” and also the satirical poem no. 64 of *Naibedyo*):

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures... It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers... It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean- cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow... I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life- throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment¹⁸. (Mukhopadhyay and Sen, 2012, p. 219)

Also in *Gitanjali*’s poem 36 (1909):

Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?... All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on... Keeping steps with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away--- colours, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment¹⁹. (ibid., p. 221)

These lines celebrate rhythm of dance in beauty of nature. As he put it in one of his songs, *anandadhara bohiche bhubane* or the stream of joy is flowing through this world, all these lines directly exhibit how even if he would not always directly refer to dance but could visualize

performance elements within the rhythmic flow of an all-encompassing nature. This dramatic technique became “the response of man’s creative soul to the call of the real” (2005, p. 52), thus fulfilling the ultimate aim of his educational philosophy: attainment of the pure bliss in life through art. He could not only identify the systemic movements in nature but could make us readers also visualize and feel this perpetual flow and counter flow within. This eye for locating something new, this perspective or a constant creative urge turned leisure or pleasure or fun into the expression of creative joy which itself is a crucial trait of his modernist impulse. As if he could clearly imagine that the perfect visualization of poetry can only be through dance. The constant rhythmic movements within the nature could be translated through movements of mind and body. This indication towards choreographic possibilities through writing evidently indicates towards Tagore as a modern thinker of pedagogy of dance.

“Let us take heart and make daring experiments, venture out into the open road in the face of all risks. ...defying unholy prohibitions preached by prudent little critics, laughing at them... when they ask never to cross the threshold of the(ir) school-room”. (2005, p. 53- 54) It can be argued that instead of competition he felt the urge of building his university as a community as true to its Indian value and self on the basis of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘mutual help’, ‘ethics of coexistence’ and ‘cooperation. The two of the most significant bases of building this new community were arts and nature. “His songs and dances

¹⁸ Tagore’s translation from *sei jugjugantarar biraat spandan amar naarite aji koriche nartan*

¹⁹ Tagore’s translation of *parbi na ki jog dite ei chhande re, khose jabar bhese jabar bhangbari anonde re.*

awakened the senses and refined the emotions and quickened the sensibilities of the students, the teachers and the Santiniketan community at large and taught them to experience, love and share the earth as they experienced it, and through this shared experience empathize with each other. In the creation of this empathy, he was joined by the artists of Santiniketan.” (Tuteja, 2017, p. 95-110) Artists like Nandalal Bose and Suren Kar made the everyday life of Santiniketan come alive in their works. Neither for them nor for their student’s art and life meant different things as they planned the costumes, stage and decoration of the festivals with creativity and amazing mastery. The way they used locally available and unconventional materials like brick, wet sand, hay, cow dung, grains, leaves, buds, flowers etc. and their incorporation of

elements from Vedic as well as folk and tribal cultural forms was extraordinary. Through this engaging process “besides giving birth to a modernism based on the sense of an experienced and shared world, they also breathed life into the real world and transformed the familiar surrounding into embodiments of beauty and uniqueness connecting the community with the environment even as they lifted it from its everyday ordinariness and made it distinctive.” (ibid.) By placing nature and performance at the centre of their creative work, Rabindranath and his colleagues helped the people of Santiniketan to move beyond the rigid barriers language, religion, caste and unite as a new community.



Alpana or decorative design made out of wet clay and natural colours, by teachers and students of Visva-Bharati. Photo courtesy: personal collection

As Tagore was experimenting with pedagogy, he sought to bridge education,

environmental awareness, sensitivity to the local community and the concept of *ananda* or joy in his progressive and humanist experiments, and with

immense flexibility and possibilities, dance fulfilled this criteria of connecting the community, the environment, the aesthetic and the pedagogic. For example, the festival emerged as the space where the different components of the pedagogic came together. He accepted the philosophies of different religions and brought them within specific festivals to create a sense of humanitarian principles of all the religions. On one hand, these festivals encouraged everyone to come out and meet others to do something collectively. The festivals were designed to engage the university students, and also to create an interface between the students, the immediate local community, and the broader global community. The structure was ritualistic, but the ritual itself made way for the aesthetic through which ideas could be effectively dispersed. On the other, they created a space for different cultural endeavours like poetry, Vedic chanting, music- dancing or decorating- to become a place to live in, instead of an object to consume. The songs and dances composed on these occasions were often simple enough for everybody to sing and dance along and the entire community could participate together as it does even today. Not only productions but open air rehearsals directly and indirectly involved the teachers, the students and the whole community in Santiniketan utilizing the maximum out of the existing human resources and bringing his philosophy of art and education into actual pedagogical practice where participation was always as significant as presentation. As Nahachewsky opines:

In participatory dances, the focus tends to be on the dancers themselves. The process of dancing is important. A good dance differs from a less

successful performance based on how it feels. Presentational dances tend to be perceived more as a product than a process. The success of a particular performance is judged by how it looks. Participatory dances take place at social events where a particular community comes together to celebrate. Presentational dances are often performed on formal stages and in other locations where the physical and cultural distance between performers and audience is greater. (1995, p. 1-15)

Spring festival or *Vasantotsav* (or *Dol* or *Holi*) would be a perfect example in this context. “Much more than the staged performances, it is the procession of students moving and singing as a collective body, and gathering under the trees to perform improvised dances to his songs (with audience members often joining in) that upholds the spirit of community that Tagore instilled in his institution.” (Chakravorty, 2013) The presentational does not get the entire spotlight and paves the way for the participational. These are the occasions when the ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ world collide and interact through dance, music, colour and laughter. These common cultural spaces where even audience can participate remind us of Homi Bhaba’s third space, not as a disjuncture, but a bridge connecting the old with the new, the known to the unknown giving rise to ‘something different, something new and unrecognizable...’ (1994, p. 211) As third space pedagogy transcends the narrow bounds of East/West binary by offering new possibilities, new possibilities are created among communities and dancing bodies through participation, collision and interaction within these festivals. It is this entire lively process that nurtures

dance's potential in working towards holistic education and a "modern secular society which would try minimizing discriminations on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicity, and last but not the least, gender." (Sarkar Munsii, 2008)

Conclusion

"...Tagore's compositions rouse deep emotions beyond the Bengali-speaking peoples. Dances to *rabindrasangeet* bridges the generational and other hierarchies, including professionals, amateurs, and hobbyists, and Santiniketan and new styles, giving a contemporary outlook to a nostalgic, vernacular aesthetic. *Rabindrasangeet* continues to challenge the imagination of contemporary choreographers, upcoming and established dancers which they rose to accept even during the pandemic." --- Biswas (2023)

Tagore's aesthetics and sensibility towards dance was modern. So far as the legacy of pedagogy is concerned, he was interested in the processes of building vocabulary of new possibilities, movements as opposed to the usual dance classes where grammar becomes more and more rigid and movements are taught to be reproduced the exact way, as a copied fixed repertoire. Pedagogy happens in two ways, by passing on the old as it is to retain and preserve its aura or by teaching the old knowledge to create a base for the new. Tagore had always believed in the latter as dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty rightly points out that, "Tagore's version of cosmopolitanism can be understood ... not as sheer rejection of tradition but through immersion in one's own tradition to be able to comprehend and assimilate others (2013, p. 253)" Tagore had always ushered in new, not by rejecting the past but

by acknowledging and learning from it and moving forward. "*Ekhoni andha bandha korona pakha*" (do not close your winds of hope he would say). This everlasting celebration of new, ability to think (*bhabte shekha*), this quest for exploring new possibilities, hope--- they are what we should remember from Tagore's legacy of dance. The process Tagore ideated in Santiniketan is an organic process which is supposed to involve not only the students who are learning or performing dance but also the teachers, other students, residents of the ashram and even the communities who live around the campus. It is an ongoing, evolving process. The intention in this paper has never been to celebrate the intention of the wholesale appropriation of Tagore as a 'Bengali' icon, to be kept at a 'safe distance', in the 'safe hands', to museumize his experiments as sacrosanct. Rather I have tried to argue, that it has been an ongoing 'process', a process which directly and indirectly sets Tagore a modern thinker of dance, because this process of continuous experimentation signals towards some important potential takeaways.

What do we learn? We learn how dance can be perceived and practiced as a tool of education, a tool which can be and should be continuously molded, sharpened through various stages and forms, through corporeal experiences, embodied knowledge and understandings from different perspectives. Dance can be a tool of interpretation, a mode of expression, an analytical tool of characterization and storytelling, and most importantly, it is a tool of meaning making. When dance has been well established as an academic discipline, a therapeutic medium, can we not

explore its immense possibilities in nurturing the mind, body, the human connections, especially in this fast paced uncertain world? Instead of diving into the endless debate of what he had done and what he should have done or trying to repeat and represent the same thing again and again, why cannot we learn from the past but utilize our present and take it forward pushing the boundaries beyond?

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