

**Rimli Bhattacharya, *The Dancing Poet: Rabindranath Tagore and Choreographies of Participation***

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With a background in comparative studies, performance and gender studies, primary education pedagogy, and translation (Bengali to English), *The Dancing Poet: Rabindranath Tagore and Choreographies of Participation* emerges as a confluence of these strands of Rimli Bhattacharya's expertise. The author has shaped the narrative with relatively obscure documents, memoirs, anecdotes, and statistical details. With her adeptness in translation, she has skillfully excavated that which lays dormant within the printed lines. This has lent new vigor to yet another narrative on Tagore and his times, though Tagore's colossal written opus is a territory well documented, with one of the most recent contributions being *Rabindranath Tagore's Drama in the Perspective of Indian Theatre*, edited by Mala Renganathan and Arnab Bhattacharya in 2020.

Bhattacharya's maiden work in 1997, on Tagore as script consultant for a film based on his last novel *Four Chapters (cār adhyāy)*, was followed by numerous research papers. *The Dancing Poet* emerges as a narrative on Tagore's struggles through his days as estate manager to the guiding guru of Shantiniketan, his open-air schools, as well as his fundraising performances. Bhattacharya foregrounds his attempt to institutionalize the arts by bringing them into formal training at Shantiniketan and taking them out from the folds of hereditary performances. She has also traced the history of dance and its changing contours and spaces, especially woman's entry into theaters and public spaces through these performances. Needless to say that in addition to education pedagogy, performance, and woman dancers, the focus of this work has been choreographed through the dancing poet himself, Tagore.

Spaced out over eight chapters, the author begins in a synoptic way with the themes of the successive chapters and the queries she has in relation to them in chapter 1, titled "The Shape of the Questions." In chapter 2, "Movement and Movements," the author looks into the macro- and micro-cultural movements developing amid mass mobilization of man and machines in the interwar period. She has analyzed within a comparative framework the creation of new national cultures in Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, and the so-called New Israel through arts and performance, along with the micro-movement at Shantiniketan. There Tagore was experimenting with the new pedagogy of body and mind and also creating *brati bālak* (a scouts-like organization with local rural boys at Sriniketan), which emphasized nurture (*śrī*) and strength (*bal*). Bhattacharya compares the ways in which the narrative conducive to the ruling elite was being developed in new cultures around Europe and Russia with technological support like films, whereas in India, a colonized territory, cultural awakening necessitated an indigenous understanding of the range and diversity of arts and crafts alongside the emergence of hegemonic models of cultural nationalism.

The narrative on women and Shantiniketan becomes more detailed in chapters 3 and 4. In "Cause Apart," chapter 3, the author looks at the entry of women into theaters and other public spaces, an important phenomenon of the times, which catalyzed an old debate related to women adopting the profession of dance and drama, hitherto open only to hereditary performing women, known as *naṭīs* (actresses). She also underscores the debates centered on the issue of women earning a livelihood through dance and the possibility of prostitutes taking up acting as a means of livelihood in those times.

Chapter 4 illustrates attempts in the contemporary arts to fashion the new woman dancers (and male dancers as well) along the ideals of the past. She brings out contradictions visible in the new modernity inspired by ancient sculpture or Ajanta murals, as well as Tagore's own ideological foundation of Shantiniketan-Sriniketan as an educational institution formed by the morals of austerity and plainness ("begging missions") and fundraising through song, music, and dance performances.

The themes of chapter 5, "Opening Up the *Utsav*," are the reconfiguration of *utsav* (festival) in Shantiniketan; *baiṭālik* (music and dance gatherings in the early morning or late evening hours); bringing household decorations like *ālpanās* (geometric floor designs drawn with wet rice flour) into public spaces; new performance spaces instead of auditoriums; and how imported "folk" dances like *garbā* are *Utsav* in the Indian context, understood as a festival or celebration. Within the Brahmo Samaj movement, a nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movement started by Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) to launch the so-called Bengal Renaissance, *utsav* had acquired a significant meaning and had become an integral part of Tagore's practical agenda. He realigns the *utsav* in Shantiniketan in a distinct way to signify an excessive surplus beyond mere need. Instead, it aimed at *ānanda* (joy). While referring to the *utsav* and its impact on building community, the author also raises the important issue of whether or not such festivals were at all significant in overcoming hierarchies of caste and gender.

Chapter 6, "Even Their Demons Dance," sourced from Tagore's correspondences from Java (*jābhā-jātrīr patra*, "letters from Java"), is an account of his Southeast Asian tour covering Java, Bali, Malaysia, and Thailand. Though purposed as a fundraising tour, the author exposes the real intention behind his tour, which was the exploration of the ancient and still-living links between the mother country (India) and its cultural outposts. Tagore's travelogues are further extended in "Kinship, Eros and the Nation," chapter 7. Here the author describes Tagore's 1934 Ceylon tour as an extension of the dancing tours aimed at taking the spirit of his Vishvabharati University elsewhere. She digs into the term "kinship" and finds it quite intriguing and compelling in the age of anticolonial movements in different parts of the world, where she hints it to be a symbolic form of Asian comradeship.

The tension between artistic independence, institution building, and modalities of funding through and in the performance is reflected in "Performance and Begging Missions," chapter 8. The author also draws attention to some areas that require comprehensive research, such as the range, amount, and modes of funding for the various institutions that grew in the three decades until Tagore's death. There is also an attempt to explain the seamless recycling of Tagore pieces in the larger field of dance and theater in West Bengal during the last six decades.

Bhattacharya concludes her study with the significant issue concerning the context of the virtual mode being employed for artistic exchange across nations today. She asks whether the arts remain a visceral field in which resignification is indeed possible?

I strongly recommend this book. Being interdisciplinary in nature, it caters to both academic and lay audiences interested in Tagore, performance, dance, theater, and women in the public spaces of early twentieth-century Bengal. The exhaustive notes and references at the end of each chapter are appreciable, as are the black and white photographs of Tagore, *utsavs* at Shantiniketan, and dance performances, which make for beautiful additions.

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REFERENCES

Renganathan, Mala, and Arnab Bhattacharya, eds. 2020. *Rabindranath Tagore's Drama in the Perspective of Indian Theatre*. London: Anthem Press.

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