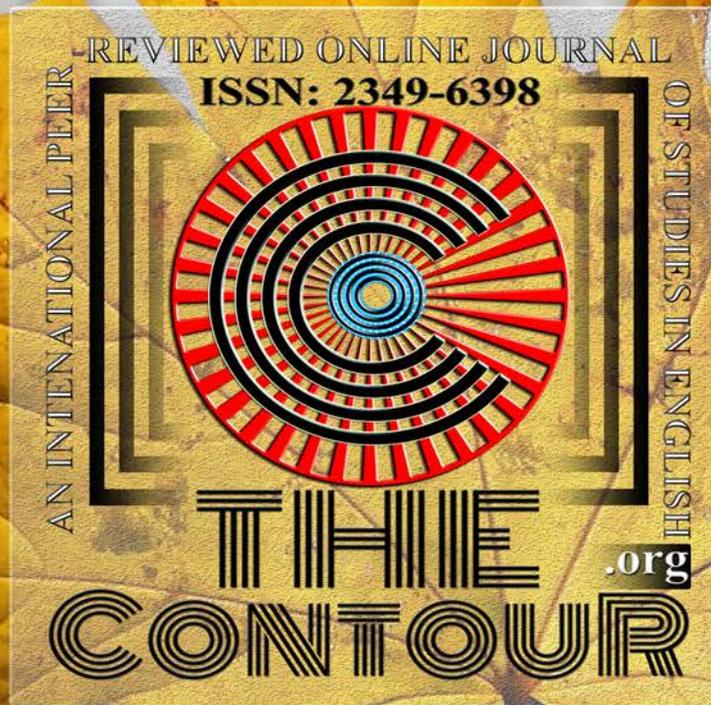


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ARTICLE

The Aesthetics of Rabindrasangeet: An Approach through Sri Aurobindo and the Vedas

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Abstract

The tradition of Rabindrasangeet may be traced back to the mantra of the Vedic-Upanishadic eras. Sri Aurobindo finds in Tagore's lyrics and songs the poetry of vision, incantation, prayer and revelation. This happens by a miraculous fusion of words and tune in the heat of intuitive inspiration, which makes Sri Aurobindo link Tagore with the Vedic-Upanishadic singers, who just saw and sang the revelatory Word. Rabindrasangeet is in danger in the mass-society because of a chaotic use of instruments and commercialism. The question is: will the Rabindrasangeet form as mantra exist in future?

Keywords: mantra, Kavi, agni, third production, rhythmic voyage.

Rabindrasangeet is a sophisticated art form, but it demands a kind of simplicity and spontaneity, which would not tolerate an excessive intervention of the intellect and the instruments in its performance. Together with his poetry, this is unquestionably, as also by Tagore's own admission, the greatest achievement of the multi-dimensional Bengali writer. The most significant clue to Tagore's poetry and music comes from Sri Aurobindo, another Indian poet-critic of undeniable status. Along with Whitman, Carpenter, Yeats and some other Irish poets, Sri Aurobindo considers Tagore as a forerunner of a revivalistic note in poetry, a musical poetry lost with the old Vedic-Upanishadic poets, to whom the aim was just to see and sing as a supreme act of revelation of the Spirit in us. Something would swell up directly from the fountainhead of the Spirit, -- which Plato sees as a "divine enthusiasmos" in *Ion* (Russell 7), and take shape naturally as a "rhythmic voyage of self-discovery" (Aurobindo SABCL 9, 3). That was an unteachable technique, an inspired and intuitive technique, which used to be called *mantra* in the Vedic-Upanishadic era. *Mantra*, according to Sri Aurobindo, is poetry of vision, revelation, prayer, magic and incantation. The word *Kavi* in classical Sanskrit meant any maker of prose or verse, but in ancient Sanskrit, the word had simply defined a person who could just see and sing; preaching, thinking, analyzing,



sermonizing and philosophizing were not his business. In Tagore, Sri Aurobindo sees this revival, a dynamic revival, of the Rig Vedic incantatory manner of utterance.

Agunerparashmanichnoyaoprane

E jibonpunyakaro

E jibonpunyakarodahondane

Agunerparashmanichnoyaoprane

Amar eidehokhanituledharo

Tomaroidebaloyepradipkaro

Nishi din alokshikhajalukgane

Agunerparashmanichnoyaoprane

Anadharergayegayeparashtabo

Sara rat photaktaranabonabo

Nayanerdrishtihoteghnuchbekalo

Jekhanepurbesethaydekhbealo

Byathamoruthbejaleurdhapane

Agunerparashmanichnoyaoprane

E jibonpunyakaro

E jibonpunyakarodahondane

Agunerparashmanichnoyaoprane

Light me up with your fire

Make my life sacred

Sanctify my life in fiery offerings

Raise my body

Make me a lamp in your temple,

Let the lamp burn day and night in my songs

Let your touch in the dark

Bloom new stars throughout the night

Enlightening all with its rays

Making my agonies rise upwards¹.

This is the divine *agni* of the Rik Veda. It is a purifying fire indicating what Sri Aurobindo calls *Sadhanain* Tagore. When I call it a dynamic revival, I mean a revival of tradition in a new language and with reference to the evolving consciousness of the new poet-singer. The tradition is clear in the repeated use of the fire symbolism in Tagore's songs. Let us see some verses in Sri Aurobindo's own translation:

¹ My translation



MADHUCHCHHANDAS VAISHWAMITRA

SUKTA 1

1. I adore the Flame, the vicar, the divine Ritwik of the Sacrifice, the summoner who most finds the ecstasy.
2. The Flame adorable by the ancient sages is adorable too by the new. He brings here the Gods.
3. By the Flame one enjoys a treasure that verily increases day by day, glorious, most full of hero-power.
4. O Flame! the pilgrim-sacrifice on every side of which thou art with the environing being, that truly goes among the Gods.
5. The Flame, the summoner, the Seer-Will, true and most full of richly varied listenings, may he come a God with the Gods.
6. O Flame! the happy good which thou shalt create for the giver is that Truth and verily thine, O Angiras!
7. To thee, O Flame! we day by day, in the night and in the light, come, carrying by our thought the obeisance. (Aurobindo *Hymns* 39)

This is the tradition behind Tagore's fire symbolism and this appears again and again in his songs of prayer and vision and revelation. Here is a great fire song made more intense by SuchitraMitra's magnetic voice:

*Aajtaraytaraydiptosikharagnijale
Nidrabihingagontale.
Oiaalok-matalswargosabharmohangon
Hothaychhilokonjugemornimatran
Aamarlaglonaamonlaglona,
Tai kalersagorparidiyeelemchole
Nidrabihingagontale.
Hethamandomadhurkanakanijalesthale
Shyamolmatirdharatale.
Hethaghaseghaseronginphuleraalimpan,
Boner patheaadhar-aaloyaalingan
Aamarlaglo re monlaglo re,
Tai eikhanetei din kateeikhalarchhale*



Shyamolmatirdharatale.

Among the stars in the sleepless sky
 A fire flares in an eternal flame
 Its vast expanse is maddened by light
 Once I was a guest there
 But it was not to my mind.
 Under that sleepless sky
 I swam across the ocean of time
 And came to the greeneries of this world
 Here between the earth and the sky
 A soft sweet whispering goes on
 Here the grassland is adorned
 By paintings of flowery patterns
 Here in the woodlands
 Light and shadow embrace each other
 I fell in love with them
 So I spend my time here
 Playing among the greeneries of this world².

Sri Aurobindo was taking the ancient word as his highest model of poetry and music, rejecting the distorted form of the later days calling it a “nautch-girl of fancy” spinning fiction. He refers to Tagore’s poetry and music in the ancient sense, poetry as the divine agni (agunerparashmani), the sacred fire of the rishis of the Rig Veda. By 1917, when Sri Aurobindo began writing the Future Poetry, the recluse was feeling comfortable with reading the Bengali originals of Tagore, although he was never at ease in speaking the language. And he was eloquent about its sweeping impact on the world.

It is a mistake to believe that only the songs under the title Puja (adoration) were the objects of Sri Aurobindo’s praise. More than fifty percent of Tagore’s songs come from very high sources of inspiration if we go by Sri Aurobindo’s clarification of those sources in his letters to K. D. Sethna, which give a finishing touch to Sri Aurobindo’s theory of poetry as mantra of the Real. As per Sri Aurobindo’s theory of mantric poetry, the inspired vibration may influence the substance of a song or even just on the style of a song even if its substance is not directly spiritual or psychic. It is just because of that, because it is a sacred art, Rabindrasangeet should not be taken as a plaything; a thing to be sung with Jhankar beats or any other new instruments, which do not go with the songs of incantation, prayer and revelation. This is the crisis, along with a forgotten credo in the mass society.

What then is the essence of Tagore songs? What is the new form he tries to discover by breaking away from the rigid classical rules of grammar? Why did he feel the need of breaking the rules of the grammar of music in search of his inspired grammar? Let us listen to his own words on that:

²Translation: Kumud Ranjan Biswas 315



Since our science of music is a dead science we cannot grasp the essence of that science and we raise a hue and cry over the grammar of music, the raga and the ragini, the dominant and the subordinate notes. The grammar of a living language keeps on changing; it ceases to grow when the language is dead. A grammar cannot save a language from death; like the ancient Egyptian it can make a mummy of the language. Poetry cannot flourish in a literature dominated by rhetorics. Now that the Bengali society is liberated from the shackles of rhetoric its voice can be heard in the air. I recommend that music, the companion of poetry, also be released from the inner prison of grammar and let there be a marriage of the two (Introduction to Tagore 43).

A large part of Tagore's credo as a poet and a musician is hidden in this passage, a credo which fits in perfectly with our theoretical framework based on the ancient doctrine of poetry and music coming from the poet-singers or the singing poets, who could not afford to follow what Walter Pater calls "Mind-in-Style", which means the mental preview of the artistic structure. The nature of inspired art which Pater calls "Soul-in-Style" (see his essay "On Style") demands obedience to the writer's inspiration, which cannot bow its head to the restrictions of grammar and yet which by virtue of its being the revealed Word rising in the heart of the seer enjoys the rhythmic voyage of self-quest. As I have said elsewhere that the songs of Tagore are the fusion of words and tune (*sur*) creating a third production, which is neither always high poetry nor always the perfect spreading of a Sree or Purbi, or behag or bhairavi. Something may grow out of a mediocre poetry, or some borrowed images may be heard flaring up by the touch of the tune (*sur*). In his effort to move away from the pure classical tradition Tagore was trying to create the form of modern songs, modern by virtue of an intuitive discovery of the secret rhythms of music, secret in the heart of the rishi, not in the codified grammar of music, which has no value unless it is part of a discovered vibration from the home of the Spirit. Among other things, Sri Aurobindo is the most relevant interpreter of Tagore's music, because he takes the cue from Anandabardhan and Avinavgupta that the Word has multiple layers of meaning—the sound value, the thought value, the sense value and finally the soul value (11). Commenting on the new art of mantric poetry Sri Aurobindo writes in the Future Poetry:

The rhythmic word has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power, which is infinitely the most important thing about them. And though this comes to birth with a small element subject to the laws of technique, yet almost immediately, almost at the beginning of its flight, its power soars up beyond the province of any laws of mechanical construction: and this form of speech carries in it on its summits an element which draws close to the empire of the ineffable (11).

Theoretically speaking both Tagore and Sri Aurobindo reject the mechanical part of creation, as they are specifically pointing at an inspired creation beyond the logical and prescribed structures of the rhetoricians. Sri Aurobindo further explains the point of inspiration in the following passage



asserting that poetry determines its own form; the form is not imposed on it by any law mechanical or external to it:

The poet least of all artists' needs to create with his eye fixed anxiously on the technique of his art. He has to possess it, no doubt; but in the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or even a mere undertone in his mind, and in his best moments he is permitted, in a way, to forget it altogether. For then the perfection of his sound-movement and style come entirely as the spontaneous form of his soul: that utters itself in an inspired rhythm and an innate, a revealed word, even as the universal Soul created the harmonies of the universe out of the power of the word secret and eternal within him, leaving the mechanical work to be done in a surge of hidden spiritual excitement by the subconscious part of his Nature. It is this highest speech which is the supreme poetic utterance, the immortal element in his poetry, and a little of it is enough to save the rest of his work from oblivion. Svalpamapyasyadharmasya! (11).

Sri Aurobindo picks up the words of the Bhagvad Gita from another context: a little progress on this path can protect one from the most dangerous type of fear. Here the fear means the fear of failing in the art of inspired discovery by stressing on the technical or the intellectually and logically controlled verse. This is the link between the singer-poet and the theoretician of incantatory art. Except for SuchitraMitra and Subinoy Roy, who did a miraculous fusion of perfect technique and inspiration, all the great singers of the past were great naturals, knowing instinctively an art which goes beyond all technique in an effort to find what Sri Aurobindo calls "the soul of emotion" (15). There were and are failures too where singers are found to become melodramatic in trying to mean the songs. Meaning the song is part of the process of uttering the inspired Word, which is concealed in the home of Truth (*sadanadrtyasya*, as mentioned in the Rig Veda). And the inspired utterance has its own vibration from a higher consciousness. One may well ask were MalatiGhoshal, RenukaDasgupta, Amiya Tagore, RajeswariDutt, Kanika Banerjee, NilimaSen, SuchitraMitra and some others were great spiritual giants of Sadhana? Surely they were not. The point is somehow at the time of singing they could open their best self because the age was not hampered by professionalism and this commercialization of music was beyond their distant imagination. Whimsical stress and playing to the gallery cannot get at the soul of emotion, especially when mass society is constantly pressing for entertainment and not for a finer aesthetics, leave alone the spiritual or the psychic.

The expressive function of Tagore's words had been partly communicated by Tagore and chiefly inherited by the great singers of the past, inherited spontaneously out of a simple commitment in an age conducive to true music, in an atmosphere of Tagore's aura dominating the existence of those singers. Reaching Santiniketan after Tagore's demise, SuchitraMitra could get a feel of that aura vibrating in the air of Santiniketan still in the later months of 1941 and even beyond that for a long time till Rabindrasangeet became a commercial product in the 1980s. She is a supreme exponent of the songs of the Prakriti, where Tagore's borderline mysticism takes on a new colour in his effort to express the inexpressible:



Choddobeshekanokhelo, jirno a baas falofalo

Prokashkorochironootonbondhure

i.e. why play in disguise, throw away the old garment/

help

manifest the Friend, forever New.

The interesting thing about Rabindrasangeet is that the incantatory verse is spread in all the divisions, Prem, Puja, Prakriti, Swadesh and in fact everywhere peeping in, through, and amidst, even the most boyish frivolities. Not that Mitra is deficient in the other varieties, although love belongs specifically to Kanika Banerjee, despair to RajeswariDutt, surrender to NilimaSen, peace to Subinoy Roy and the pure psychic to the even older singers like Sahana Devi, MalatiGhoshal and RenukaDasgupta (whose nasal stress, like ShamshadBeghum's, hides a fathomless depth of the inmost centre of our being). The only places where Mitra is a bit dimmed are the songs of prayer, partly because of her dominant intellectuality and mostly because of her innate rajas, the tremendous individuality in the act of rendering

Sometimes a singer may contain his/her depth of sense in the voice itself independent of the perfection of utterance of the mantric word. K.L. Saigal, a Punjabi and a complete novice in regard to the nuances of the bengali words, gave us a masterpiece in "amitomayjotosuniyechilemgaan". In such cases the voice itself carries the depth of sense along with the rhythm of incantation defying the limitations of pronunciation. One may refer as well to "Pipasaahaaynahimitilo" by RajeswariDutta (one of the great singers of Rabindrasangeet). It was aptly used in a documentary on Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. The deep psychic-vital despair was masterfully rendered by the non-Bengali singer. The first two lines are plainly vital, but the last two lines bring in the note of the psychic with that great prayerful gesture.

minatikori he korojore/ juraosongsardahotobopremeramrite

i.e. I urge you with a deep aspiration/ to heal the heat-burns of Life with your love

Did the tradition of Rabindrasangeet—the fusion of words and tune creating the third art—end after 1941? The cultured Bengalee is very happy to believe that in a blind devotion to Tagore. But then, a fourth art was created between 1941 and 1966, and even beyond that occasionally till 1972, in Bombay, led by composers like Naushad Ali, Madan Mohan, Roshan (Hritik's grandfather), C. Ramchandra, Chitragupt and others who fused the instruments perfectly to take the Tagorean art to the zenith of perfection. For Tagore it was basically tanpura and esraj creating the quiet of the soul. For those new gods of post-1941, who were assisted by excellent poets like ShakeelBadayuni, SahirLudhianvi, Jan NissarAkhtar and KaiffeeAzmi, there were fresh new Indian instruments from classical music, like the violin, flutes, sarangi, sitar, sarod, surbahar and the Tagorean piano. The marvel was the act of fusion creating the fourth dimension in modern Indian music. It was a sign of an assured sadhana in music, because there was a great labour and dedication and commitment in the age created by Naushad.

The crisis in today's Rabindrasangeet lies in a chaotic and noisy effect created by a haphazard use of instruments without knowing the deeper meanings of the songs. The instrumental noise is often



meant to cover up the lack of sur in the singers. Technology is a boon today; it can make everybody sound musical, sureliawaaz! The other issue of crisis, the major one, relates to the inability in most singers to mean the words of incantation. A song like “Come, come my love/ Light up a lamp “or that famous “All these your herds of light/ The sun and the numberless stars” (*Eitotomaralokdhenu*) is a direct re-creation of the sacred fire, the agni of the Rig Veda. Alas! What are they doing with those songs! May be when fifty years later the money value of the songs decreases, there will come a chance of a restoration of the mantric music of Tagore. Till then, one should preserve the great creations of the bygone days, so that nobody forgets what it was once before the mass society had arrived.

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