

Words and Tunes: Principles of Assimilation (With Special Reference to Tagore Songs)

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The art of song is an artistic fusion of poetry and music, that is, words and tunes. In some forms of singing, the words play a more important role, subduing the associated tunes, as, for example, in the *Kathakata* (musical story-telling), the *Kavigan* (extempore musical debate on mythological, social or political themes), or the singing of the *Ramayana*, in Bengal. On the other hand, some other forms, for example, Hindustani classical vocal music, be it Dhrupad or Khayal, lay greater importance on the tune, the raga, than the semantic content of the composition.

At the extreme poles, there is pure music and there is pure poetry. Instrumental music is pure music without any semantic content; recitation, without any tune, is pure poetry. The ups and downs of a recitative voice do not constitute music.

Both words and tunes primarily originated from the same source, the human vocal organ. With the same organ, man learnt to speak and to produce tunes. It is the innate and primordial musical instrument for both articulation and note-production. Again, both words and tunes are addressed to the same sense-organ, that is, the auditorial sense-organ.

But these distinctions are superficial. They cannot illuminate the main principles of the fusion of words and tunes, since the two are structurally and semiologically quite different from each other. Vocal sounds, when articulated, produce vowels and consonants. Vowels and consonants constitute the word. Words make up a sentence. Thus language evolves.

Over centuries, prose developed into the preserver and transmitter of philosophy, science and history. In addition, there emerged prose-medium literature such as the short story, the novel, the essay, prose-drama, etc. In poetry, however, language incorporated rhetoric and prosody not only for expressibility but also for, and perhaps mainly for, suggestivity and evocation.

In the earliest music culture of any country, music was originally associated with lyric. Pure music evolved later. Musical instruments were formerly used as accompaniment for vocal music. By virtue of talented specialization, instrumental music, which is the embodiment of pure music, evolved.

A word stands for something else, some object, idea or action. Unless this happens, words, sentences and languages have no usability. On the other hand, musical notes and all the tonal forms of music mainly stand for themselves. Musical

tune is incapable of being translated. It cannot be substituted by any other thing, nor has it any other alternative paradigm.

According to Herbert Spencer's speculation¹, *what* man uttered turned into words and *how* he uttered them (the change of pitch) was the original germ of musical notes.

Rabindranath Tagore, in his early life, subscribed to and elaborated on Spencer's speculation². But, in course of time, his reflections on the art of music evolved as follows:

Tune itself is a dynamism. It vibrates in itself. Words have to plead for semantics. Such is not the case with tune, which express nothing but itself. Some particular notes, combining with some others, produce a tonal *ensemble*. Rhythm adds dynamism to it. The acceleration infused in our heart by this tonal dynamism is a pure passion, without any other referential connection. Generally we are stimulated with pleasure and pain in connection with some particular events in our world. But when musical tune moves our consciousness, it does so with direct contiguity. So, the passion it generates is altogether unaccountable.³

If this be the case, it is very difficult to find out any satisfactory principle of union between the word and the tune. Yet, apart from the specialized branches of pure poetry devoid of music and pure music devoid of poetry, the song form of music synthesizing the two has been evolving successfully.

The union, or rather the fusion, of words and music is something like the union of the concrete and the abstract, the form and the formless, the finite and the infinite, the known and the unknown, the speakable and the unspeakable, the earth and the firmament and so on. Of course, the tune cannot be called formless as it has its sonorous form, however much ethereal it may be. In a good song, the words tend to transcend and the tune tends to come down to tangibility, and thus they are beautifully united.

Tagore metaphorized this union in various ways. Sometimes he called the word and the tune twin brothers, sometimes two sisters, sometimes brother and sister, and very often, husband and wife. From time to time, the poetry is the husband, the tune the wife, and sometimes just the reverse. Another comparison is also found where Tagore called the word and the tune two co-wives, one very often tending to suppress and dominate the other. The most ideal metaphor Tagore used is that of Ardhanareeshwara⁴—the deity whose one half is feminine and the other masculine.

Let us see what Helmholtz said about the union of music with words:

The union of music to words is most important, because words can represent the cause of the frame of mind, the object to which it refers, and the feeling which lies at its root, while music expresses the kind of mental transition which is due to the feeling⁵.

Yet another kind of comparison is found where Tagore quoted Gluck:

My idea was that the relation of music to poetry was much the same as that of harmonious colouring and well-disposed light and shade to an accurate drawing, which animates the figures without altering their outlines.⁶

Regarding the relative importance of words and music in song there was a running,

argumentative, discussion in the issues of *Vichitra*, a Bengali monthly, in 1937-38. Various scholars contributed to it. Tagore was also requested by the editor to express his views on the subject⁷, excerpted below, and later amplified in his article in *Prabasi* in 1939:

Man has been singing songs assimilating words and music. There has not been any debate on the relative supremacy of tune or words. If any debate is opened at all, I would say that music itself is the husband who has uplifted language to its own clan.⁸

It may be emphasized that Tagore songs are well-known not only for their superb poetic content but also for their extraordinary musical quality. Tagore held the view that a good song adopts its words by virtue of its own intrinsic adaptability⁹.

In Tagore's musical creativity, sometimes tune was the predecessor and words followed as in the case of his earlier compositions based on classical models. He captured the compactness, depth and detachment of the Hindustani classical Dhrupad style. He assimilated and infused these qualities in most of his religious songs. He wilfully avoided rhythmic feats (*laykari*) so that the depth of his lyrics might not be marred. Some of the best examples are: '*Tanhare arati kare chandra-tapana*', composed in the obsolete raga Bada Hansa Sarang and set to Chautala; '*Prathama adi taba shakti*' in raga Deepak, set to Surphakta tala (also called Sultala); '*Veena bajao he mama antare*', composed in Puravi and set to Dhamar. There are hundreds of such models, where classicism is avoided but the classical essence is suitably infused.

Occasionally, Tagore wrote the lyrics first, and set them to tune and rhythm afterwards. The songs of *Bhanusingher Padavali* are the best examples of this. These were written in his early youth under the pseudonym Bhanusingha to conceal his identity. The theme of the songs is the love of Radha and Krishna. Some of the notable songs are '*Shanana gagane ghora ghanaghata*', '*Gahana kusuma kunjamajhe*', '*sajani*', '*sajani Radhika lo*', etc.

Sometimes again, words and tune came simultaneously to Tagore. '*Bado bedanara mato bejchho tumi he*' is one such example. Most of his songs of the rains, composed in his later life, are also examples of this. '*Amar priyar chhaya akashe aj bhashe*', '*Shravanera gaganera gay vidyut chamakiya jay*', '*Aji jhara jhara mukhara badara dine*' and numerous other such songs of Tagore also fall into this category. In every case, the synthesis of words and tune is remarkably artistic. The composite fusion has acquired a special style which may be called Tagorean.

Both poetry and music are dynamic. The human mind is also dynamic. When the dynamism of the artistic mind and that of the musico-poetic art synchronize, a fusion occurs between words and their musical rendering. In other words, the lyrical depiction turns sonorously colourful along with the tune and rhythm by virtue of creative dynamism. The two-streamed creativity of poetry and music appear to flow along a single channel, which is called song. A song will take its best possible form when the creator is both the lyricist and music-maker. Tagore-songs are fine examples of this type of aesthetic totality.

In ancient Sanskrit texts a melody or *raga* has been defined as a methodical and artistic tonal rendering which tinges our mind. Tagore also subscribed to this

attribute of a melody. Moreover, he believed that apart from its colourfulness, a raga is also associated with the intrinsic illumination of the human heart¹⁰. He preferred the sentiment of a raga to its customary details. He always insisted on the economy of grammatical paraphernalia. His attitude towards Hindustani melodies is not the same as that of a professional classicist. Yet, he exploited their best in most of his songs. He also incorporated the folk tunes eliminating their rustic elements and utilizing all their appealing qualities. He moulded them with a tinge of sophistication so that his unparalleled lyrics may be fused with them. 'Amar praner manush achhe prane', 'Jadi tor dak shune keu na ase tabe ekla chalo re', 'Pagla hawar badal dine' may be cited from among innumerable examples.

Tagore's realization is much more animated than Gluck's pictorial analogy (quoted earlier), since picture is a static art while the poetry and music of a song, as well as the human heart creating and enjoying them, are always in motion. We have already observed that this common dynamic quality brings them together in a happy artistic fusion.

G.E. Lessing, in the appended notes of his *Laocoon*, stated that song should not be considered the union of the two arts (i.e., poetry and music), but rather as one and the same art¹¹. Matthew Arnold in his poem 'Epilogue to Lessing's *Laocoon*' ascribed supremacy of poetry over painting and music, and claimed that poetry can depict the continuous stream of life which painting and music cannot. In his words: Beethoven, Raphael, cannot reach/The charm which Homer, Shakespeare teach."¹²

Tagore, in his early youth, read the whole poem thoroughly, explained it up to his own realization, and put forth his own observations that the art of music, in the course of its gradual advancement, would be able to express the dynamism of life instead of choosing a single, lyrical feeling. His hypothesis, foretold in his essay 'Sangit-o-kabita'¹³, got gradually practicalized by virtue of his creativity in his music-dramas such as *Valmiki Pratibha*, *Kalmrigaya* and *Mayar Khela* and his dance-dramas such as *Chitrangada*, *Chandalika* and *Shyama*, where words and tunes got united in the perspective of emotive human lives. Needless to say, a variety of rhythmic structures along with suitable tempos add to the ups and downs of that emotive sonority.

Apart from various traditional rhythms, Tagore invented some unconventional lyrical structures set to music. In such songs, the rhythmic divisions and accents are quite natural, and follow the syllables and pronunciation of the words. 'Byakula bakulera phule' and 'Je kandane hiya kandichhe' of nine beats and 'Kampichhe dehalata tharo tharo, of 11 beats are the best examples of this.

In the 2000-odd Tagore-songs compiled in the three volumes of *Geetavitan* (most of the notations have been published in *Swaravitan*, Vol. 1-62), one may notice variegated tinges of subtle sensuousness in the form of devotional fervour, love, communion with nature, patriotism and innumerable other feelings. For facilitating easy understanding, Tagore in his later life categorized his songs into six broad groups: (1) *Puja* (Devotional songs); (2) *Swadesh* (patriotic songs); (3) *Prem* (love songs); (4) *Prakriti* (songs of nature and the seasons); (5) *Vichitra* (songs of various

content, not classifiable in other categories); (6) *Anusthanik* (ceremonial songs).

The first two categories belong to *Geetavitan* Volume-I and the rest to Volume-II. In Volume-III, there are the music-dramas and dance-dramas mentioned earlier together with some more songs of devotional fervour, love, patriotism and nature.

Yet, Tagore songs, though pluralistic in outward manifestation, are monistic in the realm of inward realization. The divisions shown above are never like water-tight compartments. Very often, they intermingle and overlap. That is, some nature songs are surcharged with love, some devotional songs are based on nature, some love songs and devotional songs are on the borderline of each other. For example, the following song in *Khamaj*, *Ektala*, can be taken both devotionally and erotically, though it is grouped in the *Prem* (Love) category:

*Amare karo tomara veena,
Laho go laho tule,
Uthibe baji tantriraji mohana angule.*

(Make me your Veena, take hold of me, and let my strings resonate with your lovely fingers).

Let us see the following song in *Kafi-Pilu*, set to *Dadra*:

*Amar abhimaner badale aj
nebo tomar mala,
Aj nishisheshe shesh kore di
chokher jaler pala.*

(Today, I shall win your garland in lieu of my hurt. Tonight, before daybreak, I shall close the chapter of my tearful days.)

The ethos is a composite mixture of love and devotion. It is categorized as a devotional song.

The semantic and poetic values of Tagore songs are not necessarily confined to Bengali-knowing people only, since their musical values transcend this particular language group and appeal to all. Any lover of music can enjoy something special in Tagore songs. We may hope that with the spread of the Bengali language, the literature and music of Tagore, the universal appeal and value of Tagore songs will be gradually established. □

NOTES

1. Herbert Spencer: 'The Origin and Function of Music', in *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1868, pp. 210-238.
2. Rabindranath Tagore: '*Sangiter Utpatti-o-Upajogita*' in *Sangit-Chinta*, 2nd edition 1392 B.S., Visva-Bharati, pp. 274-282.
3. Rabindranath Tagore, *Sangit-Chinta*, p. 226.
4. Tagore's discussions with Dilip Kumar Ray, *Sangit-Chinta*, p. 90.
5. H. Helmholtz: 'On The Sensations of Tone', Dover Publications, New York, 1954, ch. XIV. p. 251.

6. Quoted by Tagore in 'Katha-o-Sur 2', *Sangit-Chinta*, p. 84.
7. Rabindranath Tagore: 'Vichitra', ed. Upendranath Gangopadhyay, 1344 B.S., pp. 565-567; compiled in *Sangit-Chinta*, pp. 80-82 (Katha-o-Sur 1).
8. Rabindranath Tagore: 'Rupa-Shilpa', *Prabasi*, ed. Ramananda Chatterjee, 1346 B.S.; Compiled under the title 'Katha-o-Sur 2' in *Sngit-Chinta*, p. 84.
9. 'Vichitra Prabandha', *Rabindra Rachanavali*, Vol. 14 (Centenary Edition, Govt. of West Bengal), p. 743.
10. Rabindranath Tagore: 'Sangiter Mukti', in *Sangit-Chinta*, p. 47.
11. G.E. Lessing: *Laocoon*, tr. Robert Phillimore, George Routledge & Sons, London, Appendix, p. 317.
12. Mathew Arnold: 'Epilogue to Lessing's *Laocoon*', *Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 221-227.
13. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Sangit-o-Kabita' in *Sangit-Chinta*, pp. 15-21.