

## The Plays of Tagore

LILA RAY

*One and only one idea has imperceptibly taken possession of all my work up to the present, appearing in various guises, the idea that the finite is not limited by its boundaries, that it is possible to perceive and reveal depthless depths in the smallest particle.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

**V**almiki Pratibha was written in 1881. A song-drama, it was the poet's first play. *Prakritir Pratishodh*, which followed four years later, dispensed with music. Both were performed at the private theatre of the Tagore family at Jorasanko. The history of the Bengali theatre is divided by historians into two periods. The first was the era of wealthy private theatres, and lasted from the beginning of the nineteenth century down to 1872. The second dates from 1872 to the present day, and is the era of the public theatre. The private theatres were invaluable in the development of theatre but they could not accommodate the growing audiences, and were closed to the general public in the early eighties. They did not go out of existence, however, and continued to fulfil the function of little theatres everywhere as grounds for testing new works. Throughout his life, Tagore had at his disposal a well-equipped stage and a skilled group of performers to work with. His elder brother, Jyotirindranath, was a well-known dramatist and wrote thirty-two plays of his own. And the poet's home was one of the centres of intellectual and artistic life of the day.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was full of intellectual ferment. Religious and social reforms occupied the best minds, and political unrest, combined with growing nationalism, fostered a revolt against all that was oppressive, constricting, or authoritarian. The theatre was intimately associated with this stimulating activity, but the passage of the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876 checked its growth. Private theatres were exempt, and continued to develop unhampered. Few of Tagore's plays have found popularity with the professional theatre, though at one time *Bisarjan* was the best-loved drama in Bengal.

The first three of the poet's tragedies, *Raja o Rani*, *Bisarjan*, and *Malini*, were written in 1890, 1891, and 1895 respectively. The first two are in blank verse with some scenes in prose, and the third is a musical. Tagore used differing techniques and forms, combining them in various ways—song-drama, blank verse, dramatic verse and dance-drama. His historical plays and tragedies are, for the most part, in blank verse.

*Raja o Rani* (later rewritten as *Tapati*) is the poet's nearest approach to domestic tragedy, although the chief concern of the play is the relationship between a ruler and his rebellious subjects, a theme which is fully worked out later in *Raktakarabi* and *Muktadhara*. As a domestic tragedy, the setting is too romantic to be realistic, and the story, though based on historical foundation, is largely imaginary. Sumitra, the queen, finding that the king's passion for her is so possessive that it interferes with his duty as a ruler, leaves him,

going back to her own people, the Kashmiris. It is not until she is dead that the king can see her and love her for what she truly was.

*Bisarjan* and *Malini* are concerned with the conflict of incompatible ideals, a conflict which in *Prakritir Pratishodh* concludes happily in the conversion of the sanyasi, but here ends in tragedy. In *Bisarjan*, Joysingh, the adopted son of the arrogant and bigoted priest, is driven to sacrifice his own blood at the altar of the goddess Kali in what is a magnificent and symbolic act of atonement. In his doubt and hesitation, Joysingh reminds us a little of Hamlet, but the self-immolation of Joysingh is a wholly Indian way of resolving a conflict.

As a play, *Bisarjan* shows some of the faults common to the Bengali theatre of the time. There are too many characters, too little stage action, and too many episodes. This is caused by a mistaken concept of action. Increasing the number of episodes does not necessarily increase the action, nor heightens the tension. On the contrary, it results in a multiplicity that is confusing. What is required in good drama is more action about fewer things. It was for this reason that the Greeks restricted the time of a play to twenty-four hours. There must be concentration upon the inevitability of a single event. If the characters have to describe and comment too much upon off-stage action, they are, beyond a certain point, apt to become involved in a swirl of words. In the traditional Indian theatre, actors tend to stand around and orate. This is a lesson which Tagore was to learn very quickly, and these faults are absent in his later work. He became, in fact, a master of stage action, and his study of symbolic movement led him to develop the dance-drama, a form which he pushed to the peak of effectiveness in *Natir Puja*, *Shyama*, and *Chandalika*.

The action of *Natir Puja* is confined to a single day, the full-moon day of the month of Baisakh, when the birth of the Buddha is to be celebrated in the evening. But the king, Ajatshatru, has banned the Buddhist religion, and the altar marking the sacred spot in the garden where the Buddha once sat has been demolished. Worship is forbidden on pain of death. The King further commands Shrimati to profane the place still more by dancing there at the vesper hour. Shrimati is a devotee, the *nati*, of the Buddha. The climax of the play is her impassioned and awe-inspiring dance. One by one she removes her jewels and costly garments, casting each in turn on the broken altar as an offering until she stands revealed in the simple yellow robe of a Buddhist nun, and pays the penalty of her devotion.

*Chandalika* tells the story of an untouchable girl who falls in love with Ananda, the Buddha's favourite disciple, when he asks for a drink of water. She uses witchcraft to win him, but is so moved by the sadness and paleness of his face as he approaches her that she repents and foregoes her triumph. *Chandalika* is perhaps the most fully psychologically realized of all his characters. For the most part, Tagore is content to show through a situation, with broad strokes, how tragic forces work, but he prevents emotion from degenerating into sentimentality by balancing it with wit. In *Shyama*, a beautiful courtesan of the Buddhist period sends a young boy who is devoted to her to his death in order to save the life of the man she loves. Her lover discovers what she has done and finds himself unable to forgive her.

In these plays, the crisis is internal, and the action develops around an emotional need or an inner change of attitude. Man is the central figure here, and the emphasis is on character. In this sense, they are modern morality plays, for the poet is preoccupied with the development of the moral man. This is true even of *Chitrangada*, which at first appears to be only a romantic comedy combining song, drama, and dance like a seventeenth-century masque. Its real theme, however, is the true nature of beauty. Chitrangada, the warrior princess who loves Arjuna, fails to win him because she lacks sensual beauty. At her entreaty Madan, the god of love, grants her physical beauty for a year, and Arjuna is delighted with her. Her identity is then not known to him. However, before the year is out, Arjuna begins to tire of her, and reports of the feats of a warrior princess give rise in him to a profound admiration for her. Chitrangada then reveals herself in her true form, and he loves her all the more, and the play ends happily. There is a hint here of a theme which the poet explored fully in *Arupratan*, a later version of *Raja*. In this play, written when the poet was at the height of his powers, the king is invisible; he is represented on the stage only by a voice. His queen, Sudarshana, seeks him everywhere but fails to find him and, in her impatient eagerness, garlands an earthly king whose beauty of feature fascinates her. In the emotional turmoil which follows, wars are waged and kingdoms plunge into flames. At last, the proud queen is forced to leave her palace and walks the roads humbly, happy at last in the companionship of the true king who speaks to her from the fire. Sudarshana's search for self-knowledge, a knowledge which is also spiritual knowledge, provides the drama. There is dilemma here, and a wrong choice is made from which Sudarshana extricates herself through grief and suffering. The presence of the invisible king as a character makes this a mystery play as well as a morality play.

The invisible king of *Arupratan* is transmuted into the king behind the screen in *Raktakarabi*. The king rules in a most impersonal and authoritarian manner. Ranjan, a young idealist, rebels, and the king's subjects rally around him. The conflict is realistic and political, the crisis external. The inevitability of the climax arises out of the sequence of events, and the action, for all its symbolism, is in the outer and not the inner world. Ranjan is killed, much as Supriya in *Malini* is killed. In character and type, he resembles Supriya. The sympathy and attraction Supriya felt for Malini has in *Raktakarabi* developed into the passionate love of Ranjan and Nandini. The king in *Malini*, who is a somewhat negative though benign influence, takes on definition and strength in the screened king of *Raktakarabi*, who, after Ranjan's death, breaks through his screen to lead his subjects in their revolt against his vassals.

*Muktadhara* is also symbolic, and its subject appears to me not so much a revolt against the machine as critics declare, but more a protest against the misuse of scientific power by men in authority. In its harshness, it recalls Eugene O'Neill. The King of Uttarkut has a dam built across the Mukta by his engineers in order to cut off the water supply to the people of Sivtarai who have become restive and unruly. The people of Sivtarai start a satyagraha under the leadership of the saintly Dhananjaya. There is famine in the country, the result of

water shortage, and they refuse to pay their taxes. The crown prince of Uttarkut is ordered to subdue them. Instead, he wins them over by his concern for their welfare and breaks open a pass through the mountains so that they may have access to the outside world. Embarrassed by this outcome, the king sends his brother-in-law to Sivtarai whose oppression, added to the hardship of the famine, quickly drives the people to desperation. The crown prince, disgraced and imprisoned, discovers he is a foundling and belongs, therefore, to the entire people. He is released by rebels and the prison set on fire, but he refuses to flee. Instead, having come to know of a secret flaw in the construction of the dam, he destroys it, knowing that by doing so he will himself be swept away in the rush of the released waters. Here, once again, we meet the self-immolating hero of *Bisarjan*, drawn on a much larger scale, in whose death humanism triumphs.

If *Muktadhara* and *Raktakarabi* are the most political of all Tagore's plays, they are also perhaps the most European in manner. *Raktakarabi* is a plain-spoken protest against regimentation, bureaucracy, and authoritarianism, and *Muktadhara* protests against the abuse of mechanical power. They are tragedies. Tagore attacked the same problems in his farces. The lightness of this form enabled him to be even more merciless. In *Bisarjan*, we are made to feel a certain pity for the priest Raghupati, who in his frenzy causes the death of the one person he really loves. His sudden and ruthless awakening is the real climax of the play. And the unrepentant strength of Kshemankar in *Malini* arouses a certain awe. But what can be more barbed than the wit of *Tasher Desh*, the farce in which the poet's comic powers fuse with his fantasy and the symbolism of his mature years? Part fairy tale, part fantasy, and partly a comedy of manners, it describes the adventures of a young and charming prince and his friend in a kingdom regulated by rules so absurdly strict that the inhabitants, from the king down, have become as stiff and artificial as figures in playing cards and dress like them too. There is no pity here. The young prince is frightened by no shibboleths, he respects no persons or things, and takes nothing seriously, laughing at inconsistencies and superficialities. His triumph is complete.

*Sheshraksha* is a comedy of errors, written without music in plain lively prose; its subject is the fate of several young couples in love. Another play of the same kind, equally delightful, is *Chirakumar Sabha*, the subject being a bachelors' club. Both of these are products of the poet's youth, *Sheshraksha* being a revised version of *Gorae Galad*, and are written for sheer fun. In these plays, the poet takes people as they are and finds them interesting. Here is realistic comedy at its best. Generally speaking, the love interest is lacking in Tagore's plays, but he succeeds in rousing and holding the interest of the audience remarkably well without it.

Is Tagore didactic? Is the dramatic spirit lost in his symbolism, mysticism, and desire to preach? Tagore definitely does use the drama as an instrument of social and religious change. He leaves the spectator in no doubt as to where his sympathies lie. His attitude to society is critical, and he is quick to perceive folly. His characters represent ideas and ideals through the conflict of which he constructs his drama. Of the two brothers in *Achalayatan*,

for instance, one is the symbol of revolt—the iconoclast—and the other is the symbol of true tradition—the builder—who sets to work afresh among the ruins. Of this play, the poet writes,

The sense through which our soul comes to know itself, transcends conflict, breaking through the walls of our comfort, convenience and habit. The advent of the realization which sets us free is announced to the beat of drums so terrifying until we have fought with it.

Tagore was fond of stories with religious associations and retained their religious interest and significance, interpreting them in terms not of orthodox dogma, but according to the new, enlightened humanism that grew to be such a powerful formative force in Indian intellectual life during the nineteenth century. It was a humanism which regarded sympathy, pity, mercy, love, tenderness and friendliness as the natural religion of man.

Are his characters mere abstractions, not human enough? No, they are human enough, lovingly so. Tagore saw in the child the sweet embodiment of his ideal religion, and its symbol. The climax of *Valmiki Pratibha* forms around a child's innocent, unoffending figure. In *Prakritir Pratishodh*, a little orphaned outcaste girl lost by the wayside recalls a sanyasi to a world of beauty he has scorned. In *Dakghar*, a poignantly realistic tragedy, the child dies, stifled by the weight of adult ignorance and stupidity. A child working at sums on a beautiful day in order to pay his debt to a heartless merchant is the story of *Sharadotsav*. In *Falguni*, a group of children set out in search of the old man Death. When they find him, they discover that he is no other than their own boy leader, Life. About this play the poet said, "To know life truly one must make its acquaintance through death." The little girl grows up to be, in *Malini*, the princess who turns to Buddhism, the religion of mercy, in revolt against the ancestral custom of her country; to be Nandini in *Raktakarabi*; and to dance to her death in *Natir Puja*. Aparna, in *Bisarjan*, is the symbol of all the gentleness and compassion daily outraged in the animal sacrifices held in the temple.

Another familiar character in Tagore's plays we have met in Dhananjaya, the saintly *bairagi* of *Muktadhara*. He appeared for the first time as the jolly grandfather in *Sharadotsav*, then in *Prayaschitta*, *Dakghar*, and *Achalayatan*. Sometimes, as in *Falguni*, he is a *baul*. He is always happy-hearted, wise, the friend and counsellor of the oppressed, the gay enemy of injustice, the comforter, the commentator, the sharer of burdens. He acts often as the poet's mouthpiece, instructing the audience and interpreting the action. He is a character who is dramatically very effective and has come to be inseparably associated with Tagore's work. He develops into the guru before whom walls crumble and at whose approach doors and windows fly open.

Tagore's versatility, both in technique and subject matter, as this rapid survey makes plain, was extraordinary. The mystery play, the morality play, the historical play, romantic tragedy, realistic tragedy, realistic comedy, romantic comedy, farce, the song-drama and the dance-

drama—he wrote them all. What is missing? Burlesque. Vulgarity was repulsive to him. But his characters are less varied, and roles in his plays tend to be repeated though the circumstances change.

There is no doubt that he absorbed all the influences, Eastern and Western, that came his way and made something out of them which is entirely his own. He shared with the popular Jatra and Kathak narrative traditions—as well as the sophisticated Calcutta theatre—a liking for stories taken from the scriptures, and he shared his interest in symbolic action with the former. The influence of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition is most noticeable in his plays of the seasons, where a rapport is established with nature that is found nowhere outside *Shakuntala* and *Meghadutam*. For him, man's world and the world of nature are identical, and he gives expression to this feeling with great delicacy and suggestiveness. "My work", he says in *Falguni*, "is not to be understood so much as heard, like a flute". That is to say, without seeing his plays, without listening to his characters sing and talk, it is impossible to either understand or enjoy the meaning and pleasure he conveys.

A drama can be judged only by dramatic tests, for no play is complete until it has been performed. Tagore, as I pointed out in the beginning, had his own stage to test them. He never hesitated to revise or rewrite his work and many versions of his plays exist. On the stage they are, when performed well, eminently effective.

Is his work likely to be accepted as a model by future Indian dramatists? I think his influence will certainly grow as his work is more widely understood. All the implications of his symbolism and his subject-matter are still very far from being understood. Few of his serious works have been taken up by the professional theatre. Imitation, in the circumstances, will be difficult and dangerous. Tagore is first and last a poet, and all his drama is poetic drama. And he is also a mystic. This gives his work an illusiveness and a delicacy that is inimitable. He strives, as he says in the passage quoted at the head of this paper, to make the invisible visible, to reveal the infinite in the finite. How can one imitate a person who sings:

Not with beauty shall I charm you;  
I shall woo you with love.  
Not with my arms shall I open the door;  
I shall unlatch it with song.

#### DISCUSSION

*Lila Ray:* My Bengali friends have protested against my statement that not very many of Tagore's plays have been put on the professional stage. I wish to say now that they have been taken up by the professional theatre, just to correct any impression that the profession has neglected Tagore. But I think that since Tagore wrote forty-one plays, my using the word 'several' is also justified.



*Sachin Sengupta:* Shrimati Lila Ray's statement cannot be wholly rejected as incorrect when we consider the fact that out of forty-one plays written by Tagore, only seven have ever been staged by the professional theatre in Calcutta. Seven out of forty-one do not make very many—I hope we all agree on that. Now, please allow me to mention the titles of Tagore's plays which have been staged by professional theatres in Calcutta. They are *Raja o Rani* and its revised version *Tapati*, *Bisarjan*, *Sheshraksha*, *Chirakumar Sabha*, *Shodh-bodh*, and *Grihaprabesh*. Besides these original plays, dramatized versions of some of Tagore's famous novels and short stories have also been played. They are *Naukadubi*, *Gora*, *Jogajog* and *Muktir Upay*. Our friend Sombhu Mitra's organization [Bohurupee] is not a professional concern. It has, as you are aware, produced one of the most difficult plays of Tagore, *Raktakarabi*, and also a dramatized version of Tagore's novel *Char Adhyaya*. The novel had raised a terrific controversy at the time of its publication. Charges were levelled against Tagore that he had written it with intent to lower the revolutionaries in the estimation of the public, at the instance of the then ruling power. The Little Theatre Group in Calcutta has given several performances of *Achalayatan*, one of the stiffest plays of Tagore. This group is also an organization of non-professionals. Some of Tagore's dance-dramas are being played by nondescript amateur troupes every now and then. But I must say in support of Shrimati Lila Ray that plays of Tagore which bear the exact Tagore traits and the distinctive Tagore flavour have not received attention either from the professional or from the amateur theatre, excepting, of course, *Raktakarabi* and *Achalayatan*. These distinctive plays are *Dakghar*, *Falguni*, *Malini*, *Arupratan*, *Sheshbarshan*, *Basanta*, *Sharodotsab*, *Sundar*, and several others. While Tagore was alive, he presented them before the public on appropriate occasions by way of object lessons and also for his own satisfaction. Successive Santiniketan troupes have more or less maintained the tradition. But these plays have virtually remained untouched by professionals and amateurs who call themselves progressive, because they have failed to fix these plays in the framework of drama they are familiar with. But I feel that those are just the plays to give us a clear idea about the synthesis Tagore had achieved, yet they seem to be pre-eminently Indian in texture, colour, and spiritual experience.

*Suresh Awasthi:* I want to know whether any different method and pattern of production, other than the usual method of presentation generally adopted, are necessary when producing Tagore's plays?

*Lila Ray:* Well, in my paper I have not touched upon techniques because they were outside its scope. But at Santiniketan, we have done some experimental work led by Tagore's family. Several generations of this illustrious family have devoted themselves to this kind of work. I have seen them working, and I hope I will be able to tell you something that will interest you. They have built a marvellous experimental theatre there. Only Tagore's plays are experimented with at this theatre for the time being. The technique adopted is very simple. The stage is equipped with a complete set of lighting paraphernalia. The settings are managed by students of art. You know there is a school of art and a school of music at Santiniketan. Students from the latter school look after the musical side of productions. Our audiences sit on the ground at a little distance from the stage.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* Do I understand you to mean that no special technique is necessary for the presentation of Tagore's plays? Is that not what you want, Mr Awasthi?

*Suresh Awasthi:* I want to know if we need any particular methods of production in respect of lighting, music, and decor in general which are different from those required to produce other plays?

*Lila Ray:* Perhaps Mrs Shrimati Tagore will be able to present a better picture.

*Shrimati Tagore:* Tagore always aimed at one thing, and that was simplicity in production. By referring to this quality, I do not mean to convey that he denied altogether the necessity of creating the physical conditions a play demands. On the contrary, he was almost meticulous about them. Light, music, movement, recitals, background—he wanted everything to be in perfect harmony with the inner spirit of his play. What he did not want was the intrusion of any external agency to frighten away the tender spirit that throbbed inside his plays. He used to keep off all disturbing elements so that the soul of his plays could find a congenial atmosphere. Allow me to illustrate what I mean by citing an example. Let us take *Bisarjan*. When he produced the play, he never for a moment thought it necessary to create a setting to show the temple. He simply placed some stone steps to indicate that there was a temple there. Those stone steps were necessary for the use of the players. But the interior of the temple was never intended to be used in the play. Therefore Tagore did not care to represent the temple itself on the stage. That there was a temple would be known to the audience when they heard the lines of the play. He wanted his audience to listen to his play and not merely to see the surface of it. And although he eliminated the temple in *Bisarjan*, he did not neglect to show the play of light in this production—from the setting of the sun to darkness, and then to the full bloom of the moon. The soul of his play demanded it; he could not let it go. He liked songs to be well sung but disliked to be disturbed by what is known as background music, particularly when his lines demanded rapt attention. Now if you take all these features into account, you will, I hope, realize what his technique was. And then you will know what particular technique is necessary to represent a play by Tagore.

*Ahindra Chowdhuri:* Tagore had produced so many different types of plays in such various styles that it is almost impossible for anybody to say—this is the technique he usually adopted and his plays have to be produced in accordance with this technique. I feel such an approach to technique is not sound, if not altogether wrong. After all, what is technique? It is, as Mrs Shrimati Tagore has nicely put it, the use of various skills to help release the spirit that lies dormant in the drama, to help it take a shape. If that is so, then every drama needs a distinctive technique to take shape on the stage. And as a matter of fact Tagore has, we know, adopted techniques quite different from one another in his productions. After getting back from Japan, he tried his hand at some of the techniques the Japanese use. Returning from Java, he tried Javanese techniques of dance. And I believe nobody here would deny that he has used European techniques too to bring out the soul of his plays. I had the privilege to assist in the production of three plays of Tagore while I was working with the Art Theatre. We used different techniques to produce those three differ-



ent kinds of plays. Tagore saw the plays and was not shocked to see what we had done. He blessed us.

*Sombhu Mitra:* I had the privilege of watching people producing some of the plays of Tagore when I was at Santiniketan. On the surface, a production presented by Tagore looked very simple, but I have rarely seen any producer more keen on details—and the mystery of details—than Tagore himself was. I have seen him conducting a rehearsal at an initial stage. While doing it, he read out the lines of each individual character of the play and acted them. He read the lines in such a way that by keeping my eyes closed for some time, I came to feel as if I was listening to the play performed by a full cast. When I opened my eyes, I found that he was not merely reading out the script as it would suit the different roles but he was also demonstrating the movements. He was emphasizing the intonation so that the players could, by observing him minutely, understand his conception of the characters. He was very meticulous, as Mrs Tagore has said. And he hated anything mechanical about a performance. The greatest possible inspiration from within, and the greatest possible care in giving expression to it, were what he used to insist on. He was a master in the technique of dramatic production. His plays cannot be produced simply by getting the lines by heart. They require a tremendous study, and much effort and histrionic ability are needed to give them that simple look.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* Will Mrs Ray please tell us what she thinks about Tagore's contribution to Indian drama as a playwright?

*Lila Ray:* That is a difficult question to answer. He has written forty-one plays. That itself is a contribution to drama, and there are so many facets within that body of work to be considered. But the most striking characteristic of all his plays is their Indianness. It was his conviction that there was nothing wrong in taking any good thing found anywhere. There is still a tendency among our writers to avoid borrowing from abroad. They feel that it humbles them. Tagore never suffered from such a complex. He has shown a way to the writers of our generation by keeping an open mind. And that is what I call his Indianness.

*Snehlata Sanyal:* I agree with Mrs Ray on the openness in Tagore's outlook. His plays lead us on over the walls we ourselves have raised, and invite us to a closer association with humanity striving to attain freedom from bondage—not only physical but also mental and supramental. That is his abiding contribution to our drama. His plays revitalize our tradition by bringing to us from the West the life force that was languishing for centuries for political and social reasons.

*Shrimati Tagore:* Another great contribution he made was the introduction of dance on the stage through his fascinating dance-dramas. Dancing had become almost a vulgar display of the female body in certain parts of the country before Tagore came forward to save it and give it its own respectable place in society.