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The Revolutionary Impact of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Natir Puja'

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I. Introduction

"The history of India that we read and memorise and take exams on is just a nightmare story of India's dark ages. ... Even in those dark days, this fight and killing is not the main thing in India. ... The life current that was flowing in the real India at that time, the waves of effort that were rising, the social changes that were taking place, cannot be found in history." - Rabindranath Tagore (Tagore 5).

It has been demonstrated elsewhere, including by this author, that the 1926 performance of Rabindranath Tagore's *Natir Puja* established the conditions for Rabindranath to create his dance style and, ultimately, his dance-dramas *Chitrangada*, *Chandalika* and *Shyama*. (Chatterjee 72-74) However, to understand why this caused such a revolution for dance in India, it is necessary to see how it fits into the wider, historical context of the evolution of dance in the Indian subcontinent.

This paper presents an overview of that historical evolution to demonstrate that the 1926 performance of Rabindranath Tagore's dance creation *Natir Puja* proved to be a pivotal moment in the reclamation of embodied aesthetics within Indian performance culture and played a key role in the renaissance of Indian dance as the respectable cultural practice we see today.

II. The evolution of Indian dance before the 19th century

There is some controversy among historians about the precise date when dance emerged in India. Even so, it is well-established that the origins of Indian dance date back to ancient times.

Over the course of four millennia, dance in the Indian subcontinent evolved from every-day ritual and communal expression (during the prehistoric and Indus Valley Civilisation), to a highly codified sacred and courtly art (during the Vedic, classical and medieval periods), to court entertainment and commercial theatre (during the Mughal and early colonial periods). Indigenous/tribal dances and village folk dances were the most widely practiced Indian dance forms throughout all these periods.

Dance in prehistoric times (c. 9000-7000 BCE)

Prehistoric rock paintings at the Bhimbetka rock shelters (Madhya Pradesh, c. 9000-7000 BCE) show groups of figures in dancing poses, sometimes in ritual or hunting contexts, suggesting that communal dance was integral to early ritual and social life. (Vatsyayan 12-19) Primitive people made sounds to express their feelings, along with some facial expressions and body movements. Although those body movements did not create a complete dance, they were a means of expressing the feelings of primitive people. Those movements gradually took the form of dance.

Dance during the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 7000-1500 BCE)

Several dancing statues have been found during archeological excavations in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. These were the two largest cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation (also known as the Harappan Civilisation), which is regarded as one of the world's earliest and most sophisticated urban cultures, estimated to have existed between around 2600 and 1900 BCE.

One such statue is the famous bronze ‘dancing girl’ of Mohenjo-Daro. It is estimated to have been created between around 2300 and 1700 BCE. The statue shows a young woman in a confident pose with one hand on her hip and the other arm hanging down, adorned with bangles.

Beautiful terracotta figures of dancers, as well as stone and bronze figurines, have been excavated in large numbers from numerous Indus archaeological sites. A male dancing figure, sculptured in greenish sand stone, discovered from Harappa has been identified as Nataraj.

According to Hindu mythology, Shiva as Nataraj is considered to be the Lord of Dance. According to tradition, Shiva played the *bheri* [a large kettledrum which has a deep, booming, resonant sound] to create the primordial sound, from which the first rhythm emerged. Dance was born from Shiva’s cosmic dance performed in that rhythm.

Other dancing figurines have also been found at Harappa, as well as musical instruments, indicating that the Indus Valley people had a highly evolved performance style. The sophistication of the figurines and instruments suggests that some dancers and musicians enjoyed special status and patronage. (Sengupta 72)

Dance during the Vedic and early classical age (c. 1500 BCE - 600 CE)

Indian dance developed further during the Aryan civilisation in India. Although dance had been practiced to express human emotions before the Aryan civilisation, it is believed that dance took the form of classical dance through the thinking and imagination of the Aryans.

This period was equivalent to the beginning of the Treta period in Hindu cosmology. During this period, Indra, the King of Gods, together with all the other Gods went to Brahma and asked him to compose something that would alleviate the suffering of humans and bring them joy and peace. Brahma then took elements from the four Vedas (text from *Rig Veda*, singing from *Sama Veda*, drama from *Yajur Veda*, and aesthetic essence from *Atharva Veda*) to create the fifth

Veda. This fifth Veda, which he called *Natyaveda*, included dance, singing and instrumental music.

Bharatmuni wrote *Natyashastra* based on the *Natyaveda*. It is a vast treatise in Sanskrit with around 6,000 poetic verses, structured into 36 chapters. It is the oldest surviving ancient Indian work on the performing arts.

Natyashastra discusses dramatic composition, structure of plays and the construction of a stage to host it, genres of acting, body movements, make-up and costumes, the role and goals of an art director, the musical scales, musical instruments and the integration of music with art performance. The *Natyashastra* is notable as an ancient encyclopaedic treatise on the arts, one which has influenced the dance, music and literary traditions of India for centuries.

Its aesthetic "Rasa theory" asserts that entertainment is a desired effect of performance arts but not the primary goal, which is to transport the individual in the audience into another parallel reality, full of wonder, where he experiences the essence of his own consciousness, and reflects on spiritual and moral questions. (Singh 86-89)

There is another ancient treatise about the art of drama: *Abhinay Darpan*. It was written by Nandikeshar after Bharatamuni wrote *Natyashastra*. There is a lot of valuable information regarding dance in *Abhinay Darpan*, which includes not only the art of acting but also defines the mudras, neck movements and other elements used in dance.

The mythical history behind *Abhinay Darpan* is that, Indra, the King of the Gods, expressed his interest in having dance lessons from Nandikeshar. It was to give these lessons that Nandikeshar wrote *Bharatarnab*. Seeing the voluminous size of *Bharatarnab*, Indra asked Nandikeshar to write a smaller version of the book, which led him to write *Abhinay Darpan*. (Mukherjee 31-35)

According to Hindu mythology, Bharatmuni did so on the instructions of Brahma to promote the *Natyaveda* through his sons. This is how the creation and propagation of dance began in the Indian subcontinent.

Dance is also mentioned in various epics from this era, including the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

As the period progressed, dance too started changing. Dance gained considerable popularity during the Gupta era (320 - 580 CE). In the later part of this period, dance started being performed in various ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of society.

The influence of dance on Indian culture through the ages can be understood through its representation in coins, sculptures, literature and architecture.

Dance during the medieval period (c. 600-1700 CE)

The practice of involving women in religious affairs and temple services had its roots in the Puranic religion (approx. 300 B.C.E.). However, it was only during the medieval period that the Devadasi tradition came to prominence.

With the growth of the Bhakti movement all across the sub-continent (c. 1200-1700 CE), India saw the construction of various great temples that were dedicated to the Hindu Gods. As the Bhakti movement incorporated the singing of *bhajans* and songs that were dedicated to the Hindu deities, the music and dance elements were also introduced in the Devadasi system. Girls and women dedicated to temple service sang music during the services and rituals at the temple.

Over time, temples became important centres of socio-economic activities for local people. The resources needed by Temples to support their activities, including the *devadasis*, were provided by different aspects of society, particularly from local Kings, elites and *zamindars*.

In some regions, particularly in the south of India, temples received the support and co-operation of religious, economic and political bodies. The *devadasis* learned classical dance and music, performing ritual dances as an essential part of temple worship. (M.Singh/Saha 1-2))

By the end of the tenth century, the total number of *devadasis* in many temples was in direct proportion to the wealth and prestige of the temple. The rank they occupied was next to priests and their number often reached high proportions. For example, there were 400 *devadasis* attached to the temple at Tanjore.

During the rule of the Pallava and Chola dynasties (c. 500 - 1200 CE) in southern parts of India, *devadasis* were regarded with great respect and dignity by society as a whole. They were the treated as custodians of culture and the arts such as music and dance. (Bhattacharya 3)

In various temples of different provinces across India, dancing idols, beautiful dance poses, and statues of dancing gods and goddesses can be seen. This illustrates the spread of dance across the Indian subcontinent.

Dance during the Mughal and early Modern period (c. 1526 - 1857 CE)

Mughal rule in northern India started in 1526 with Babur defeating the Delhi Sultanate at the Battle of Panipat. Akhbar, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb continued the territorial expansion of the Mughal Empire across India. Gradually, *devadasis* who were skilled in the art of dance and music / singing became part of the royal courts and darbars.

Under the Mughals and regional Hindu courts, Kathak moved from temple courtyards and village squares to royal darbars, absorbing Persian and Central Asian aesthetics. As a result, Kathak dance has the influence of both Hindu and Muslim religions.

Alongside formal court Kathak, courtesan performance cultures flourished. *Baijis* or *Tawaifs* in north India (particularly in Lucknow under Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah (1753-1774)) were highly trained in Kathak, music and poetry. Their salons (*kothas*) functioned as centres of

elite culture, where nobles learned etiquette, conversation, poetry and music. The *tawaif* were the superior class of singers and dancers or courtesans whose main purpose was to offer entertainment through song and dance to aristocratic male patrons while also providing sexual gratification to those of the aristocrats who paid the mistress of the salon or *Kotha* a befitting price. (V.Singh 1)

The European term "nautch" (from *nach*) amalgamated a broad range of professional female dance entertainments associated with courts, palaces of nawabs and zamindars, and later British officials. For Europeans, "Nautch" dancers might be *tawaifs*, *devadasis* performing outside temples, or independent professionals. In the 18th century, dance became extremely popular as elite entertainment, extending from imperial and princely courts to households of local landlords and high East India Company officials.

As a result, by the late 18th century, court and courtesan dance cultures were highly visible and prestigious among elites, while folk and tribal dances continued to dominate rural life. Dance was sacred (temple), aesthetic (court and salons), and social (festivals, weddings) at the same time.

III. The stigmatisation of dance under British rule in the 19th century

In the early part of this period, dance performances were common at official receptions, tours and private parties, and dancing girls retained many high-status patrons. However, it was also during this period that various factors led to a powerful 'anti-dance' movement by 1890.

The first of these factors was Victorian Social Purity ideology, shaped by the British Social purity movement, an evangelical Christian campaign that sought to eradicate prostitution and "immoral" entertainment in Britain and its colonies. After the 1813 Charter Act opened India to missionaries, British evangelicals established schools, publishing houses, and reform societies that spread Victorian sexual morality. The Madras Christian Literature Society and similar organ-

isations printed anti-dance pamphlets, framing dance as a dangerous form of sexuality that violated middle-class morality. (Courtney 4) (Bose 23-24)

At the same time, according to Victorian ideals, women should be confined to domestic roles. As a result, professional female performers enjoying financial independence, artistic recognition, and male patronage were branded as prostitutes and threats to social order.

Another factor was colonial anxiety that dance performances would erode European moral superiority and racial boundaries. The once-fashionable dance parties became seen as spaces where European men could be corrupted by Indian sensuality. After the 1857 Rebellion, the British authorities started to regard the *kothas* as centres of sedition and sought to eliminate *tawaifs* (*baijis*).

At the same time, English-educated Indian middle-class reformers, influenced by Western ideas, started to support the anti-dance movement from within Indian society. The Madras-based Hindu Social Reform Association spearheaded the campaign, calling on both English and Indian elites to boycott dance performances.

These Indian elite reformers were often from emerging professional classes and sought to consolidate their social status by aligning with British moral standards and attacking older aristocratic patronage systems.

The traditional patrons who had historically supported the dancers, namely the princely courts and zamindari systems, collapsed under British rule. As their patrons lost power, the *devadasis* and *tawaifs* lost their financial security. The anti-dance campaign accelerated this decline by stigmatising their art, pushing many into prostitution. (Chawla 18-20)

Lastly, the reformers circulated pamphlets claiming (without evidence) that dancers spread disease, ruined their patrons and caused physical weakness. This created a moral panic that legitimised state intervention to ban dancing. (Varga 1-5)

IV. Rabindranath Tagore's embodied aesthetics

At the age of 17, Rabindranath went to Brighton, England with his older brother Satyendranath in 1878 to study. Satyendranath's wife, son and daughter were living in Brighton at the time. Satyendranath admitted Rabindranath to a school there.

While Rabindranath was there, he used to go dancing and learned European dances and English songs. He was often invited by various families to participate in various social dances. This is how he learned some English social dances.

This gave Rabindranath his first opportunity to experience dance outside India. There he saw that dancing was particularly respected in English society. Dance, like music, was an essential part of social life in every English family, regardless of caste.

On his return to India from England in February 1880, Rabindranath was keen to include dance in his creativity. He started composing dances in a similar style to the social dances he had seen in England. He composed the dance as well as the song *Aay tobe sahochori* for Jyotirindranath Tagore's play *Manmoyee*.

However, in 1892, the Madras-based Hindu Social Reform Movement launched a petition calling on the Viceroy and Governor-General of India and the Governor of Madras for official condemnation of employing dancing women and urged legal measures to classify them as prostitutes. Even though the Viceroy and the Governor of Madras declined to do so, explicitly denying any connection between *devadasis* and prostitution, the "anti-nautch movement" gained traction through informal social pressure, publishing campaigns, and community-level boycotts. (Rao 43)

Rabindranath's thoughts on dance

According to Rabindranath, in our ordinary walking, there is an unseen dance, just as rhythm is concealed in prose.

Indian classical music is considered to include music, songs, musical instruments and dance. When the whole body, mind, steps, hand gestures and posture become expressive, it is called dance (*Nrityakala*). Dance can be regarded as the visual representation of music.

Rabindranath observed that, "our body carries the weight of its limbs, while the speed of the limbs moves the body. When these conflicting elements combine, dance is created. The speed of the body makes the weight of the body beautiful by moving through various poses - not because it is needed for our livelihood but for creation; it gives the body the appearance of dynamic art. That is what we call dance."

As mentioned earlier in this paper, since ancient times, dance has been a popular part of Indian culture among people at all levels of society. Rabindranath called dance 'the music of the body'.

However, Rabindranath realised that, "In every country, dance is regarded as an art and is respected as a means of expression. In our country, since it has been banished from decent society, we have assumed that it is not there. On the other hand, dance continues to exist among the people of Bengal, but only among the poor people. As a result, whatever they have does not belong to us. Even if that beauty is great, we are ashamed of it."

When he started his school in Santiniketan in 1901, he had wanted to include dance as part of the curriculum. However, in spite of the long tradition of dance in India dating back centuries, the anti-dance movement had created a situation in which no middle class Bengalis were prepared to let their children learn dance, let alone perform dance on a stage. Initially he taught the students 'expressionist dance' (*Bhabanritya*) himself.

In 1919, after seeing Manipuri dance in Sylhet, he stayed in Agartala in Tripura on his way back to Santiniketan. Many Manipuri people lived in Agartala. There, he met Maharaja Bi-

rendrakishore Manikyo and asked him to send a Manipuri dance teacher to Santiniketan to teach Manipuri dance in his school.

From January 1920, Manipuri dance became the first dance style to be taught at Rabindranath's school. However, he had to present dance in a different guise, explaining in the annual report of the school that the boys were exercising to *Mridangam* rhythms. Rabindranath also expressed the intention of arranging for the girls to learn Manipuri handloom techniques, as well as Manipuri dance.

Meanwhile, social purity organisations and "anti-dance" campaigns by certain newspapers had continued their informal pressure to characterise dance as being morally degrading, sexually dangerous, and financially ruinous. They used techniques such as calling for personal pledges not to organise or attend dance parties, as well as urging British officials not to accept invitations if dance was on the programme. Anyone who attended dance parties in spite of this was publicly shamed in newspapers and faced social ostracism.

The "anti-dance movement" reached its peak in the 1920s. Many *devadasis* were forced into urban rehabilitation centres aimed at "domesticating" them and the process of criminalising *devadasi* lifestyles began in the Madras Legislative Assembly.

As a result, Rabindranath faced numerous objections for introducing dance as a subject at his school. To start with, many people laughed at his ideas.

V. *Natir Puja*: The performance of devotion and transformation

It was only in 1926 that Rabindranath felt ready to stage *Natir Puja* ("The Dancing Girl's Worship").

Natir Puja explores profound themes of devotion, sacrifice, caste, and spiritual awakening through the story of an outcast woman whose faith transcends social hierarchy. It can also be read as an allegorical critique of the status of female dancers in India.

The Central Narrative

The play centres on Srimati, a palace dancer. She is a woman of low social status who is regarded as a courtesan and treated with contempt by the royal family. Despite her position, Srimati has become a devout follower of Buddhism, finding spiritual meaning and self-respect through her faith in Buddha's teachings.

She has transformed her life from mere palace entertainment to sincere spiritual practice, taking responsibility for maintaining the Buddhist stupa (shrine) in the palace and serving the Buddhist monks with humble devotion.

The Crisis and Conflict

The dramatic tension unfolds when the young King Ajatasatru ascends the throne and, under the influence of his rival cousin Devadatta, forbids the practice of Buddhism throughout the kingdom and persecutes Buddhist monks. He orders that no worship take place at the palace stupa, on pain of death.

The royal family is scandalised when they realise that Buddhist monks regard Srimati with great respect, honouring her spiritual sincerity and purity of faith. Princess Ratnavali, the King's sister, is particularly incensed. She cannot bear the idea that a "fallen woman," a mere dancing girl from the lower classes, could be elevated to a position of spiritual authority that even the royal princesses cannot claim.

Ratnavali seizes this as an opportunity for revenge. She manipulates the King into issuing a cruel and calculated order: Srimati must dance before the Buddhist altar on an auspicious day (Buddha Purnima, the birthday of Buddha). This is designed as a double humiliation.

For the royal family, having a dancer perform in front of the altar is meant as an affront to the Buddha. For Srimati, the order forces her into an impossible choice: obey and seemingly de-secrate the altar she reveres, or refuse and face execution.

The Climactic Performance and Spiritual Transformation

Srimati accepts the royal order with apparent submission. But when she dances before the altar, something extraordinary occurs. Through her dance, she does not dishonour Buddha - instead, she transforms the performance itself into an act of worship, a sacred puja (offering).

Her movement becomes a physical manifestation of her deepest spiritual experience - a communion between her embodied self and the divine. She dances with such profound devotion and spiritual intensity that she enters an elevated state of consciousness, beyond fear of punishment or awareness of worldly consequences. Her dance reveals that she has not violated her faith but rather expressed it in the most authentic way possible: through her entire being, her body becoming an instrument of prayer.

Resolution and Spiritual Vindication

The transformation is witnessed by those present. Queen Lokeswari, the King's mother (widow of the former King Bimbisar who had renounced his throne to become a Buddhist), had initially scorned Srimati. But she now recognises the truth of Srimati's devotion. Even Ratnavali, who orchestrated the humiliation, finally recognises the spiritual superiority of the dancing girl she had despised.

Srimati's ultimate act is one of martyrdom - she chooses or accepts death rather than renounce her faith, completing her sacrifice. But through her death, she achieves spiritual transcendence.

VI. *Natir Puja*: The May 1926 performance

Rabindranath Tagore's inspiration for writing Natir Puja

At the time of writing *Natir Puja*, Rabindranath had been worried about communal riots which had been taking place throughout India for many years. In addition, he had been concerned about the social stigma attached to dancers in India, in spite of India's centuries-old dance tradi-

tions. The idea of *devadasis* performing dance as an offering to God was foreign to the European mindset behind the "anti-dance movement" calling for the criminalisation of *devadasis*.

Rani Nirmal Kumari Mahalanabish included an account of how the performance came about in her book *Kobir Songe Europe-e*. (Mahalanabish 21) The following is an abridged English translation of this account by this author.

"After the Bengali New Year celebrations, Rabindranath's daughter-in-law Pratima Tagore asked him to write a new play. She wanted to stage a new play only for girls for Rabindranath's birthday on 25 *Boisakh* 1333 [8 May 1926]. So she asked Rabindranath to write a play without any male characters.

"Rabindranath smiled and asked Pratima Debi jokingly what men have done to deserve her not wanting any male character, including Rabindranath himself, in this play. Then he said that, since she had asked, he would see what he could do.

"The following day, Rabindranath said to Pratima Debi that he can write a play based on his poem *Pujarini* only with female characters, as she had requested. Within three days, Rabindranath wrote *Natir Puja*. As Rabindranath was writing it, at the end of every evening, he read aloud for them what he had written.

"Pratima Debi and also Rani Nirmal Kumari were very happy that unexpectedly Rabindranath wrote *Natir Puja*. Three days later, rehearsals began."

For *Natir Puja*, Rabindranath not only selected the girls but also taught them acting. Gouri Bose, the older daughter of the artist Nandalal Bose, performed the role of Nati. His nephew Dinendranath Tagore was responsible for teaching the songs.

Pratima Tagore, his daughter-in-law, and Nabakumar Singh (Manipuri dance teacher) were responsible for creating the dances. Nabakumar Singh, according to the convention of Manipuri dance style, used to teach how to express the meaning through mime.

In her account of the staging of *Natir Puja*, Rani Mahalanabis adds: "I remember that, during the rehearsals, Rabindranath said to Gouri: '*The dance which needs to be performed with the song 'Khomo he khomo' is not one I can teach you. You need to create that dance yourself. Just remember that the whole meaning of the play relies on this dance. It is not just a dance, this is the prayer of Nati. Only if your mind can reach that state will you bring out the true purpose of the dance.*' Gouri listened intently to what he said and did not dance at any of the rehearsals. We only saw the dance of Nati on the evening of the performance. What a beautiful image of prayer her dance movements portrayed."

The reception and social impact of the first performance

The first performance of *Natir Puja* took place on the evening of 8 May 1926 in front of the 'Konark' house in the Uttarayan complex at Santiniketan, in honour of Rabindranath's 65th birthday. Gouri Bose's performance became memorable for her depiction of submission mixed with devotion in a beautiful dance. According to Rani Mahalanabish, "It is impossible to explain what a beautiful performance people saw that day. After seeing the acting and dancing of Gouri … , the Poet [Rabindranath] was so satisfied that he gave Gouri the manuscript of *Natir Puja* as a gift."

According to Rabindranath's biographer, Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, "In the history of dance at Santiniketan, this was an unforgettable event. After seeing Gouri's dance, the Poet had no more doubts that Santiniketan had something to contribute to the art of dance." (Mukhopadhyay 56)

The painter Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's nephew, said "when she danced as a Noti, it was an extraordinary dance, which I have never seen before. I told Nandalal [Bose] that 'Your daughter achieved higher consciousness today. Take good care of her.'." (Lahiri 147)

Natir Puja created a revolution in Bengal not only because of its story but also because it was the first time that girls from decent families had danced in public on a stage. After decades of pressure from social reformers to ostracise dancers, particularly female dancers, Rabindranath used the devotion of Nati and her spiritual transformation to remind his audience that dance could be devotional, beautiful and expressive, as well as being one of the ancient traditions of India.

The Kolkata performances of Natir Puja

A few days after the performance of *Natir Puja*, Rabindranath set off on an extensive European tour. The success of *Natir Puja* led Rabindranath to plan a performance of it at Jorasanko, the Tagore family home in Kolkata, after returning from this European tour in November 1926. Its aim was to raise funds for Visva-Bharati University, which he had founded in 1921.

For this performance, he added a Prologue with a male character called Upali - a Buddhist monk who is from the lowest Sudra caste and who catalyses Srimati's spiritual transformation. Gouri Bose said in a later interview that he did so because, if a group of only girls from Santiniketan were to perform on stage in Kolkata, they would face insults.

Rabindranath himself performed the role of Upali in the Kolkata performance, being the first character to appear on stage. His decision to perform the role of Upali himself was also profoundly significant for several reasons, including particularly that:

- It reinforced the criticism of caste-based prejudice in *Natir Puja*. By personally embodying a character who was historically of the lowest caste but achieved spiritual authority, Rabindranath enacted the play's central message about the irrelevance of birth status to spiritual dignity. This was particularly powerful given his own elite Brahmo background.
- It publicly underlined his recognition of this marginalised character (a dancer). By doing so, he embodied the Buddhist principle that spiritual authority transcends caste, which was the heart of *Natir Puja'*s revolutionary message about dance and dancers' dignity.

The Kolkata performances of *Natir Puja* became very popular in and around Kolkata. *Natir Puja* was staged many times at the Old Empire theatre and Jorasanko. In 1931, in view of its commercial success, Rabindranath was asked to direct and act in a film version of *Natir Puja*.

VII.Conclusion

Through the creation and performances of *Natir Puja*, Rabindranath restored the respectable status of dance in Bengal and, more widely, across India. By integrating dance in its climactic scene in a religious setting, he also challenged the moral high ground of the anti-dance movement at its peak. As a result, *Natir Puja* became a watershed moment in the history of embodied performance practice in India.

Gouri Bose deserves credit for overcoming the stigmatism towards female dancers at the time, as well as for her entrancing performance in *Natir Puja*, which embodied the instructions of Rabindranath about the state of mind in which she needed to dance to '*Khomo he khomo*'.

The success of *Natir Puja* encouraged Rabindranath to develop a new strand of his creativity: dance. According to Shantidev Ghosh, Rabindranath announced for the first time that he was the disciple of Lord Nataraj and that he would take a vow of freedom before Nataraj. Dedicating himself to Nataraj, he said 'Lord, this is my homage: I offer my songs and dance at your feet.' He expressed this in the form of the song *Nritero tale tale, he Nataraj* .

From then on, Rabindranath started to think more about dance and included it formally in the curriculum. In the final years of his life, this culminated in the creation of his three dance-dramas *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1938) and *Shyama* (1939).

Now, in 2026, the centenary year of the first performance of *Natir Puja*, at a time when people from different languages and cultures are struggling to understand each other, it is an appropriate moment to recall that Rabindranath deliberately created his unique dance style (*Rabindranritya*) by relying on the movements of the whole body. This was to ensure that everyone

would be able to appreciate the dance without having to know the meaning of different movements or hand gestures. Perhaps, in its original conception, *Rabindranritya* could still contribute to a world which has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, whole body movement, Indian dance, Natir Puja, Rabindranritya, Dance-drama, Indian performing arts

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