

Rabindranath Tagore's Playtexts : Refashioning Source-materials—II

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III

Revisions and recensions

Rabindranath often kept coming back to the same story, though effecting changes in the narrative pattern. Some of the plays, therefore, move through multiple recensions/editions, betraying his dissatisfaction with the last-rendered version. He kept revisiting the same work, making changes—of varying degrees—to the narrative. He reworked two of his novels, *Rajarshi* (1887) and *Bouthakuranir Haat* (1883) as tragic dramas, *Visarjan* (1890) and *Prayashchitta* (1909) respectively; of the first, multiple versions exist, while the latter was further refashioned as *Paritrán* (1929). The verse drama *Chitrangada* (1892) and the prose drama *Chandalika* (1933) were reincarnated as dance dramas, the first in 1936, the other in 1938/39. He kept revisiting the *Kush-jataka* tale not only for *Raja* (1910), with its several renditions, but also for its subsequent abridgedactable version, *Arupratan* (1920), as well as for the dance drama *Shapmochan* (1931). The fantasy in the short story, *Ekti Ashare Galpo*, was elaborated in the form of a play in *Tasher Desh* (1933; revised further in 1938/39). In this context, we may remind ourselves of what Rathindranath Tagore had to say about his father's penchant for revisions: 'Father's creative mind could never find pleasure in repetition. Invariably he would make

alterations and additions to the plays whenever they were about to be performed.'²⁶ As Rathindranath suggests here, often the revisions/modifications were made for theatrical exigencies. However, one is also left with the impression that there were times when the author in Rabindranath seemed to feel discontented and had the urge to refashion a play for reasons not merely theatrical. These factors—singly or even together—could be the cause for some of these plays running into several versions.

On several occasions, Rabindranath himself has made out cases for more 'actable' structures through the revisions made. So, the preface of *Tapati* (1929) declares that the need to make *Raja o Rani* (1889) more 'actable' through 'abridgement and revision' resulted in the new play.²⁷ Similarly, *Arupratan* (1920) is supposed to be 'a terser' and more 'stageworthy' recension of *Raja* (1910), as again announced in the preface.²⁸ For similar reasons, *Achalayatan* (1912) became the shorter *Guru* (1918); *Sharodotsav* (1908) was reworked into *Rinshodh* (1921); *Prayashchitta* (1909), itself a dramatised version of the novel *Bouthakuranir Haat*, became *Paritrán* (1929)—though in between there appeared a radical reconstruction in *Muktadhara* (1922), where some of the thematic concerns and at least one major character (Dhananjoy Bairagi) had been retained. Presumably at the request of

Sisirkumar Bhaduri, the comedy *Goray Galad* (1892) was reworked as *Sesh Raksha* (1927); Sisirkumar produced the new version for Natyamandir on 14 September 1927.

Yet, as suggested earlier, theatrical necessities alone do not always explain Rabindranath's near-obsessive reworkings with the same play. The early *Raja o Rani*, despite its several rounds of revisions, still left the author with a sense of discontentment on several counts—the irrelevance of the Kumar-Ila sub-plot, the unwieldy length of the play, the dependence on the European model, and the excessive lyricism of the blank verse used.²⁹ In the very second edition of the play (1894) Rabindranath discarded no less than thirteen scenes of the first edition of 1889. A third version, which found place among a collection of his works (1896), brought back all but three scenes, and became the base for the authorized text that appeared in Visva-Bharati's *Rabindra Rachanabali* [Complete Works] of 1939. In between, there had appeared an intermediary version as *Bhairaber Bali* (1929),³⁰ as well as the English translation *The King and the Queen* (1916). Still unhappy, Rabindranath chose to rewrite the play afresh, ridding it of much of the problems of the earlier version and replacing blank verse with prose; this resulted in what was virtually a new play, *Tapati* (1929).³¹

Again, *Visarjan* (based upon the earlier section of his novel, *Rajarshi*), though written first in 1890, moves through several major revisions that even found their way into print—in 1896, 1899 and 1926. There was reportedly one version in which he omitted the role of Aparna and kept Gunavati as the only female character.³² Again, as late as in 1936, Rabindranath rewrote the play in simple prose and dispensed with all the

women characters—presumably for a performance by young male students. And the English *Sacrifice* uses prose and condenses the five acts of the original into one continuous scene. Scholars are of the opinion, 'Tagore was trying his best in his advanced years to bring *Visarjan* in line with the style of his later works.'³³

Raja was written in 1910, the same year as *Gitanjali*. It is believed he started writing this play at the request of the residents of the *ashram*-school.³⁴ What has been identified as the earliest draft is manuscript 143 at the Rabindra Bhavana archives at Santiniketan. Recent textual scholarship has revealed that '(t)he complexity of textual changes in ms 143 is such that at places one can find four to five different layers of deletion and insertion. The restlessness in the process of creation revealed through these changes suggests that this manuscript is the first draft.'³⁵ Yet, this first draft was quickly revised, and the revised version (identified as ms 148) went into print in 1911. This became the first edition of the play, published in Calcutta by the Indian Publishing House, the Calcutta branch of the Indian Press, Allahabad. Again, he went back to the earlier draft and incorporated elements from the first manuscript; in particular, he transposed the order of the first two scenes (having once transposed them already from the first to the second draft). This later revised version became the text for the second edition that appeared in print in *Kavyagrantha*, volume IX, in 1916, from Indian Press, Allahabad. He added to this edition an 'Author's Note' where he wrote:

The first manuscript of this play, *Raja*, written in my notebook, was somewhat pruned and revised when it went into print. Suspecting that this could perhaps have caused some harm [to the play], the

present edition is being printed based upon that original text.³⁶

That he had misgivings about the reception of this symbolic play is evident from his remarks made to his contemporaries. A letter to Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay, dated 17 *Kartik* 1317 B.S. (3 November 1910), betrays some of his misapprehensions:

It would be a bit strange—some would say ‘good’, others ‘poor’, while still others would not know how to respond, good or bad. Overall, three-fourths would conclude that Rabibabu’s literary powers are declining with age. I do not deny the possibility. The quality of power is ever changing. If God wills to preserve the vigour, the change will be fruitful.³⁷

Such anxieties may have prompted him to return to this play again and again, till he made a drastically shortened version of it in *Arupratan* (1920). Yet, that he could not ignore *Raja* entirely is made evident from his conflating the earlier *Raja* with the newer *Arupratan* for the 1935 performance in Calcutta at New Empire Theatre:

A play has emerged combining *Arupratan* and *Raja*. I am busy now with its production related work. The performance will be in Kolkata, perhaps around 15 December. I shall perform on the stage as Thakurda. From the cave of scarcity is reverberating the need for material gains. So, in the guise of the thespian, I will have to hold out my bowl for alms.³⁸

Though this conflated version does not seem to have gone into print, yet this was the playtext that Rabindranath had prepared for what was his final stage rendition of the play—the 1935 Calcutta performance at the New Empire. Significantly, this performance was advertised in the dailies as a performance of *Raja*:

THE FIRST PERFORMANCE IN CALCUTTA OF
TAGORE’S FAMOUS PLAY
IN AID OF VISVA-BHARATI
RAJA
AT

THE NEW EMPIRE FOR TWO DAYS ONLY
TO-DAY AND TOMORROW
WEDNESDAY, the 11th Thursday, the 12 December
Both Shows at 6 P.M...³⁹

Also, the cast-list printed on this occasion, mentions on its cover-page:

Raja
By
Students of Santiniketan
New Empire Theatre
Wednesday, The 11th and the 12th December Calcutta
1935.⁴⁰

These evidences, therefore, contradict the generally held view that having reworked *Raja* as *Arupratan* (the later version of the play), Rabindranath did not ever return to the earlier version. The conflation of the two texts for this public performance (one of the very last in which he took part as actor and director) and its having been billed publicly as *Raja*, shows that Rabindranath was not able to either forget or discard this earlier version and made a return to it as late as in 1935 for this New Empire performance.

The textual history of *Raktakarabi* is no less fascinating. The play was first serialized in *Probasi* in 1924 and later published as an individual playtext in 1926; the English version, *Red Oleanders*, was published by Macmillan in 1925. Of the Bengali text, there are no less than ten extant manuscripts available.⁴¹ Some of the author’s correspondences seem to indicate that it was initially conceived as *Yakshapuri*,⁴² but then took on the name of *Nandini* in the fourth and fifth drafts⁴³, and finally—from the eighth draft⁴⁴—became *Raktakarabi* when the red oleander flower became the central motif.⁴⁵ Earlier in this paper the letter of Kshitimohan Sen has been mentioned in

which he alluded to Rabindranath's reference to the red flower at the tip of the sapling that emerged from under the pile of iron scraps which inspired him to make the red oleander the primary symbol and rename/rework the play accordingly. Again, the first draft names the heroine as 'Khanjani'; the second draft starts with this name but then cancels it to introduce the name 'Nandini', while also toying with a third name 'Sunanda'. Subjected to a relentless process of revisions and modifications, the play exists now in no less than ten surviving versions,⁴⁶ apart from the English auto-translation, *Red Oleanders*.

Tasher Desh

Tasher Desh was the refashioning of the fairy-tale-like short story *Ekti Ashare Galpo* (1892), reportedly at the request of Pratima Devi.⁴⁷ Originally composed in 1933, the play was radically revised in 1938-39. After its early staging in Calcutta (on 12, 13 and 15 September 1933 at Madan Theatre), it was taken for performance (along with *Shapmochan*) to Bombay at the invitation of Sarojini Naidu. On 27 and 28 September 1933, when the play was given at the Excelsior Theatre of Bombay, the reception was cold; this was perhaps because the dialogue was not able to communicate adequately with the audience comprising primarily viewers who did not know the Bengali language. On 30 November, Rabindranath wrote to Pratima Devi:

...on the third day was *Tasher Desh*. The thermometer dropped to sub-normal. I felt disheartened. The problem was quickly addressed by introducing new songs and dances. ... The new *Tasher Desh* is more attractive than *Shapmochan*. The intermixing of romance and realism has done wonders in ensuring its success.⁴⁸

It is believed that Sarojini Naidu advised the poet to rework the play with more songs

and dances for the benefit of the Bombay audiences who did not follow Bengali.⁴⁹

This change radically affected the subsequent stagings of this play, with the customary practice tending towards its presentation as a dance drama or at least as a musical, with little or no importance given to the prose dialogues. Yet, on closer scrutiny, *Tasher Desh* appears to belong to the same category as Rabindranath's other prose plays like *Raja*, *Muktadhara* or *Raktakarabi*, where the interspersed songs not only add to the dramatic situation but often also function as extensions of the dialogue. That it was originally envisaged as a prose play is further borne out by the fact that Rabindranath himself referred to it as a 'natika' (play or playlet) in the dedication to Subhaschandra Bose, prefixed to the revised version of 1938.⁵⁰ In the centenary edition of the Complete Works [*Rabindra Rachanabali*] published by the West Bengal Government it has been published among the prose plays of Volume 6. The Visva-Bharati Complete Works also groups it with other prose plays like *Chandalika* and *Bansari*, reserving the dance dramas (*Nritynatya Chitangada*, *Nrityanaty Chandalika* and *Shyama*) for a different volume. Even the reviews of its early production in Calcutta in September 1933 refer to it as 'a burlesque composition' (*Nabashakti*, 22 September 1933), 'a sort of burlesque in which some serious ideas are dramatized in the form of a comedy' (*The Advance*, 12 September 1933), or even 'a seemingly comic play, but in reality bearing the poet's harsh satire and whiplash of ridicule directed at the "death-in-life" state of this land and society' (*Anandabazar Patrika*, 13 September 1933), but never as a musical or dance drama.⁵¹ It may also be argued that, as in *Muktadhara* or *Raktakarabi*, the

prose dialogues of this play, too, serve an important polemical purpose, which stands the risk of being subordinated—even blunted—by the over-use of songs and dances if the play is performed as a musical/dance drama.

In fact, the political nuances of the play became distinctly pronounced when its second edition of 1938-39 was dedicated to Subhaschandra Bose: 'You have undertaken the sacred vow to instill new life into the heart of the nation. Bearing that in mind, I dedicate the play *Tasher Desh* in your name.'⁵² Around this time, Rabindranath had written the second 'Deshnayak'—essay (1939),⁵³ which was also addressed to Subhaschandra, and which started with these words: 'I am a Bengali poet; on behalf of Bengal I greet you [*"baran kori"*, in the original] as the *deshnayak* (leader/hero of the land).'⁵⁴ Continuing the stance of an address to Subhashandra, the Poet makes an implicit call to his fellow-citizens to bestow this leadership on Subhaschandra: 'Let the collective will of the Bengali people accept you as their leader; let that will mould you in the shape appropriate for that onerous responsibility.'⁵⁵ The representation of the play as a mere musical or dance drama in present-day practice has done serious harm to its innate polemical potentials and blurred the political vision of the author. Though he has moved far from the fairy-tale like

genesis of the original short story 'Ekti Ashare Golpo', even in the fictionalized world of the Card-land the political nuances remain deeply etched, so much so that by the end of the play we are left wondering whether this is a fairy-tale or a fantasy or a dramatic discourse about decolonization—of the mind, the community, the nation.

Conclusion

Rabindranath's refashioning of sources in his play-texts, then, has traversed along diverse trajectories. He has teased out of a dream an ideological expression of non-violence (as in *Visarjan* or *Malini*); he has recast epiphanic visions into aesthetic articulations (as with the train-journey before *Chitrangada* or the blossoming of a red flower in *Raktakarabi*); he has remoulded mythical/legendary tales to suit his own myth-making (as in *Valmiki Pratibha*, *Gandharir Abedan*, *Chitrangada*, *Raja* or *Raktakarabi*); he has infused narratives—mythical, legendary or fantastical—with contemporary political relevance (as in *Natir Puja*, *Muktadhara*, *Raktakarabi*, *Kaler Jatra* or *Tasher Desh*). And in each case, he has emerged with a new interpretation, a new retelling of the original source-material—there lies not only his power of amalgamation but also the uniqueness of investing the material he has refashioned with a sense of originality. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 26 Rathindranath Tagore, 'Looking Back' in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Tribute*, ed. Pulinbihari Sen and Kshitit Roy (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2006; originally 1961), pp. 45-52; here quoted from p. 50.
- 27 Preface to *Tapati*, RR, vol. 6, p. 1034.
- 28 Preface to *Arupratan*, RR, vol. 6, p. 523.
- 29 See Preface to *Tapati*, RR, vol. 6, pp. 1033-

34. Some of these reasons are stated directly, others implicitly, in this preface.
- 30 The composition of *Bhairaber Bali* was over by 26 February 1929, and it was produced under the direction of Gaganendranath Tagore at the Empire Theatre on 27 April 1929; *Tapati*, the final product, was staged by Rabindranath at Jorasanko on 26, 28, 29 September and

- 1 October 1929 (because Empire Theatre was unavailable in end-September); it was also mounted by Sisirkumar Bhaduri for Natyamandir at Cornwallis on 25 December 1929. For details, see Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratikriya*, 229, pp. 231-42.
- 31 In the Preface to *Tapati* he declares that, despite the revisions, he had realized that ‘unless this play was written anew, justice could not be done to it.’ (*RR*, vol. 6, p. 1033).
- 32 This is reported by Satyaranjan Basu, as cited in Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratikriya*, p. 69.
- 33 Ananda Lal, ‘Tagore in Kolkata Theatre: 1986-2010’, *Towards Tagore*, eds. Sanjukta Dasgupta, Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, Swati Ganguly (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2014), pp. 515-48.
- 34 Several letters seem to indicate this—to Indulekha Choudhuri (*Shanibarar Chithi, Agrahayan* 1348 [November (?) 1941], p. 168).
- 35 Spandana Bhowmik, ‘Playwright versus Dramatist: Writing for Performance, Writing Raja’, *Sangeet Natak*, vol. XLVI, nos. 1-4, 2012: Special issue on ‘Rabindranath’s East-West Encounters: Performance and Visual Arts’ (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2013), pp. 109-20; here quoted from p. 110.
- 36 Rabindranath Tagore, *Raja, Kavyagrantha*, Vol. IX (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1916), p. 3.
- 37 *Chithipatra*, Vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), pp. 27-28.
- 38 Letter to Amita Sen (Khuku), dated 23 November 1935, *Rabindrakiksha* no. 18 (Santiniketan: Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, 1987), p. 32.
- 39 Advertisement in the dailies *Forward* (6, 7, 8, 9 & 11 December 1935) and *The Statesman* (11 & 12 December 1935); cited in *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratikriya*, p. 111.
- 40 This slim volume of 8 pages is preserved in the Rabindra Bhavana archives and includes the summary of the play, both in English and Bengali, along with a mention of the scene divisions.
- 41 See Pranaykumar Kundu, *Raktakarabi: Pandulipi sambalita samskaran* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhaga, 1998).
- 42 References to the name *Yakshapuri* are found in Rabindranath’s letters, though not in the actual drafts; see earlier remarks.
- 43 The 4th draft is no longer in the Rabindra Bhavana archival holdings at Santiniketan; it was printed in the theatre journal, *Bohurupee*, May 1986, and may be seen there. The 5th draft is on two exercise books, marked in the archives as ms 151 (i) and 151 (ii).
- 44 Identified in the archives as ms 151 (viii).
- 45 The red oleander flower does not appear in the first draft, is mentioned only twice in the second draft, and then becomes a central symbol of the play in the later drafts.
- 46 Except for the fourth draft, the others are available in the archives of Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 47 Santidev Ghosh, *Gurudev Rabindranath O Adhunik Bharatiya Nritya*, (Calcutta: Ananda, 1983), p. 65.
- 48 *Chithipatra*, vol. 3 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1942), pp. 103-04.
- 49 See Santidev Ghosh, *Gurudev Rabindranath O Adhunik Bharatiya Nritya*, pp. 90-91.
- 50 See ‘Dedication’ to *Tasher Desh*, in *RR*, 6, 1161.
- 51 See details in Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratikriya*, pp. 275-76.
- 52 ‘Dedication’ to *Tasher Desh*, *RR*, vol. 6, p. 1161.
- 53 The first ‘Deshnayak’ essay had been written in 1906, two years after ‘Swadeshi Samaj’.
- 54 ‘Deshnayak’, *Kalantar*, *RR*, vol. 13, pp. 387-90; here cited from p. 387.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 389.