

AN INSIGHT INTO THE IMPACT OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE ON SINHALA ART AND MUSIC

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The influence of *Rabindranath Tagore* (1861-1941) on Sinhala Art and Music is significant. He certainly had a genuine and far-reaching influence on local arts. He not only influenced the local art scene as a distant force, but also as a Guru from the neighbouring mainland, by making several visits to Sri Lanka.

In 1922 *R T* first came to Sri Lanka, when he visited Kandy, the hill capital. In the same year he was honoured by *Mr. George De Silva* and *Mr. Albert Godamunne* by ushering him to see the Cultural Pageant, Perahare in Kandy.¹

It was said that *R T* was highly interested in seeing Kandyan dance form. He found that the Kandyan dance forms were not appreciated and admired by the high class society of the day.

That visit made such an impact so that many of our artists wanted to learn under the feet of that great poet. From about 1938, i.e. ten years after *Vishva Bharathi*, local artists had availed the opportunity of studying there.

Among the first few students was a Tamil lady named *Maheshvara Devi* who underwent training in dance and painting. Another was a scholarly Buddhist monk named *Udakandewala Saranankara* who did religious and philosophical studies.² Others of this pioneer group include such names as *Rev. Heenatiyana Dhammaloka* and *Rathi Muthuwel* (later *Mrs. D. B. Dhanapala*). It is said that *Ariyam William*, a resident of Jaffna acted as the secretary to *R T* and the caretaker of the Primary School called *Patha Bhawan*.³

On 5th March 1930, the great poet paid a second visit to Sri Lanka for a single day. He had stayed in *Sravasthi* with the eminent Scholar, *Arthur De Silva*.⁴

As far as Sri Lankan art was concerned, this was a period of decadence. The popularity of the first professional theatre, *Tower Hall*, had long waned.⁵ There was a growing need for a fresh revival in arts. The theatre enthusiasts were seeking for new pastures with a difference. It was the same as regards music too. There was a monotony in all the musical performances.⁶ It was predominantly a case of parroting and copying of the Hindusthani cult. The

concept known as musical interpretation was nothing but etching and welding words to such lighter styles as *Khyal*, *Gazal*, *Khavali* etc. Though such musicians as *Vishvanaat Lavjee* from Bhownuggeri in India arrived here and influenced the prevailing art scene with the inflow of new tunes, these were not different from those cited earlier.

In 1932, Wilmot Perera a rich business tycoon, who had an aesthetic sense paid a visit to Vishva Bharathi in India. It was his strong conviction that the existing trend in Sri Lankan music should be changed.⁷ Wilmot Perera, who admired the Tagorian dramatic genres as *Geeth Natak* and *Nrtya Natak*, held firmly to the belief that the path taken by the local dramatists should be influenced by these traditions. As such he felt that Sri Lankans should not only see theatrical works of Tagore but also appreciate the musical tradition of *Rvindra Sangeeth*. As a result, Wilmot Perera extended an invitation to *R T* to pay another visit to Sri Lanka. On 9th May 1934, the poet visited Sri Lanka for the third time. This was a turning point in our cultural history.

Much publicity was given to his visit. It was said that Tagore was accompanied by a person called *Naba Kumarasinghe* along with a troupe of 40 other artists. Further it has been recorded that *Nandalal Bose* had his paintings exhibited here.⁸

The Tagore troupe performed a play titled *Sapmochan* on 12th, 14th, 16th, 28th and 29th of May 1934⁹. This play, undoubtedly, had a tremendous impact on the audience and this fact has been mentioned by such critics and artists as Sarachchandra¹⁰, Chitrasena¹¹, P. B. Alwis Perera¹², and Ananda Samarakoon.¹³ While *Sapmochan* was shown at the Regal theatre, several plays modeled on it were produced. Such plays as *Bhuridhatta*, *Dharmashoka*, *Siwamma Dhanapala*, *Neethingngya*, *Sinhala Le* and *Sinhala Weeraya* may be mentioned. These plays were shown at Tower Hall, New Olympia Hall and elsewhere.

There is no doubt that the discriminative local audiences found a difference between *Sapmochan* and the local plays. Further, *Sapomchan* brought about a new theatrical experience to the local theatre goer. That play was advertised in the local press as a "complete musical show devoid of dialogues", which presumably meant that they could not find a suitable Sinhala term for ballet.¹⁴ One contributor to the local press who was thoroughly moved by *Sapmochan* said; "Next to the Sigir paintings, *Sapmochan* is the other best piece of art that captivated my mind".¹⁵

The editorial comment in the *Ceylon Daily News* went as follows; "It is necessary to retain the spark kindled by the exhibition of paintings and the musical show *Sapmochan* amidst us, without allowing it to be extinguished."

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike reviewed *Sapmochan* in the *C D N* in the following words:

"The curtain went up, and my first impression was one of aesthetic satisfaction at the setting and the grouping, which had the simplicity and the beauty with which Greek drama alone has yet been able to achieve. There was Tagore seated at one end, appropriately garbed in a yellow robe, a typical bard and seer with his flowing grey hair and beard. The first thing that struck me was the beauty of his shapely hands and the long tapering fingers: only a great artist could have hands like that.

"The music started, low and soft, and the slow movement of the dance...

A great critic, writing of the poet Blake, said that there is a point of heat at which prose melts and fuses into poetry, and a point at which poetry fuses into music. Blake's poetry almost merges into pure music. But as I sat there, I began to realize that there is a further point at which music fuses into the mute beauty of rhythmical movement.

Love and wrath and sorrow and joy and chivalry—all human emotions find their place in this play, and the delicate and sure touch with which they are conveyed by the music and the dancing is a revelation of art at its highest."¹⁷

Thus Tagore had a two-fold impact on the arts of Sri Lanka. Firstly, he kindled an interest in many a local artist to change his stance of the pattern of thinking. Secondly, he paved the way for the local artists to look for new dimensions in the art scene, thereby bringing about progressive art forms on the lines laid by him.

In India, Tagore was considered as the single person who opened new horizons enabling all forms of music flow into the existing musical traditions. Those traditional forms of music rejected by the sophisticated classes came to be studied and moulded into a new creative communication. Thus the traditional patterns of music hitherto neglected were given new values and meanings.

The eminent Indian musician S. D. Burman once commented that it was Tagore who inspired him to take a liking to and sing folk songs.

In the two plays, *Valmiky Pratibha* and *Kal Mrgya* Tagore utilised for the most part Western Melodies.¹⁸ In course of time a new term by the name of 'Ravindra Sangeeth', came into being. A word of explanation is here needed. Ravindra Sangeeth encompasses diverse musical forms of South and North India as well as Western forms of music in addition to folk types drawn from such areas as *Bawul*, *Batiyali*, *Keerthan* etc.

Whenever Tagore found certain limitations in his musical expressions, he did not fail to utilise *talas* such as *Shashti* (2/4) *Navami* (5/4) and *Jampaka* (3/2).

This trend in Tagorian compositions paved the way for our local artists towards a new creative inspiration in respect of musical communications.

For a long time it had been the practice in Sri Lanka to use such musical instruments as the Harmonium and the Tabla as accompaniments. Into this noisy and blaring atmosphere there entered a pleasing, softer music via such instruments as Esraj, Dilruba and Sitar. Furthermore, the local artists instinctively felt that the word and the melody should be fused into one entity as against the hacked musical patterns.

Those young musical enthusiasts of the day who were greatly influenced by *Ravindra Sangeeth* went in search of new forms. The inspiration was mainly drawn through the keen sense of listening to *Ravindra Sangeeth*. As a result of these explorations, such musicians as *Ananda Samarakoon*, *Sunil Santha* and *W. B. Makuloluwa* paved the way towards a new direction and further developed a phase new in local music. They were thus able to create a new tradition.

The new innovations need to be clarified further.

(a) At a time when the local musicians were imitating and parroting the Hindustani melodies, Samarakoon for the first time evolved a systematic original melody of his own. Samarakoon is by and then large the pioneer exponent of the "Art song". The Gramophone disc producers of the day considered his compositions as good art as against their own commercial pieces.¹⁹

Samarakoon was also influenced by a literary diction and melody of the indigenous folk poetry and lyrics. This was exactly what poet Tagore did in India.

At the age of twenty, Tagore delivered a talk on "song and meaning." Therein he argued that music as well as the words that go into the making of a song are equally important.²⁰ This view was widely upheld by Samarakoon in the local context.²¹ Samarakoon was also the creator of the National Anthem of Sri Lanka. Here too, critics have pointed out that *Ravindra Sangeeth* had been his main source of inspiration.²²

(b) *Sunil Santha* the well-known musician and singer, had acquired his musical creativity and skills from the two Indian centres, *Vishva Bharathi* and *Bhathkanda Sangeeth Vidyapith* respectively. He seems to have been most influenced by the *Ravindra Sangeeth*. *Sunil Santha* conceived the theory that the Sinhala Music could be nurtured only via folk songs. He had emphasised that this concept was a result of the inspiration gained through *Ravindra Sangeeth*.²³ He was inspired by Western musical patterns as well. This was due to his close association with *Vishva Bharathi*. But surely, this cannot be an influence derived through *Bhathkanda Sangeeth Vidyapith*, for the concept held by that seat of learning was categorically based on the tradition modes of musical interpretation. Some critics have speculated that *Sunil Santha's* influence via Western Music was a result of his being a Catholic. It should be emphasised that some songs in the *Ravindra Sangeeth* tradition were directly borrowed from Christian Hymns. This meant a significant step ahead for the development of musical skills of *Sunil Santha*. This also could be visualized

as a starting point of a new generation of music lovers. The so called musical lovers came from predominantly the affluent English speaking middle class. As such Sunil Santha was compelled to be influenced by the Western system of musical notations.²⁴

(c) W. B. Makuloluwa's contribution to music includes such aspects as collecting folk songs. He classified them and transformed them into scientific musical notations. Furthermore he experimented in the creative forms to assess the utility of the folk traditions. It could be assumed that for all these tasks of Makuloluwa, would have been guided and inspired by *Rabindranath Tagore*.

Makuloluwa strongly argued that the Sinhalese alone could not have been devoid of a musical sense. Thus he declared that the traditional music found in Sri Lanka could strictly depict its Sinhala National identity. It is significant that all those who held this view gathered round Makuloluwa. They include such musicians as C. de. S. Kulathilaka, Ananda Jayasinhe, Weerasena Gunathilake who also had studied at *Shanthi Nikethan*. Few others who studied at *Shanthi Nikethan* were Sooriya Sanker Molligoda, Edwin Samaradiwakara, Anangalal Athukorala, G. R. Edward, Shanthi Dissanayake, Lionel Algama and Anil Mihiripenne.

One of the best creations in these lines was Chitrasena, the choreographer cum dancer. Chitrasena had admitted that though he had his formal training at Travancore and many other institutes of fame, his direct inspiration came from *Shanthi Nikethan*.²⁶ Chitrasena was just a 13 year old lad when in 1934 he first saw Tagore's *Sapmochan*. Needless to say that the aesthetic experience he had gained from that play laid the foundation for his later creations. In 1945 Chitrasena joined *Shanthi Nikethan*.

It could be well recognised that the lectures that Tagore delivered from time to time as well as the local Kandyan dance forms drew the attention of such middle class youngsters of the calibre of Chitrasena.

On 22nd May 1934, Tagore delivered a lecture on Kandyan dance at Panadura and emphasised the fact that it was sad to note the way the Kandyan dance traditions were neglected on the part of the local aesthete.

On that occasion Wilmot Perera had pointed out that the Kandyan dancers were confined to perform the perahera functions and to dances in the presence of honour distinguished persons. He had also stressed that Tagore's comment should be an eye opener to revive our neglected traditional dance forms. Further he had said that if he was blessed with wealth he would have liked to send a Kandyan drummer and a dancer to *Shanthi Nikethan* for studies.²⁷

A similar statement of Tagore helped to uplift the stagnant traditional dancers in Bengali.²⁸

Chitrasena who trained dancers to suit the modern stage adapted the same training methods as those of Tagore. Tagore was liberal to the extent that he allowed the dancer to make use of his skills to his advantage. Thus the *modus operandi* of Chitrasena could be explained thus; "My method of teaching was not rigid. Once I had given them the correct stances and the basic technical knowledge. I did not hold on to the reins, but gave them the freedom to develop their own individuality.²⁹

The terms locally used such as *Mudra Nataka*, *Ingi Nalu*, *Geetha Nataka*, are certainly terms derived from the Tagorian terminology.

Tagore did not use the western type of ballet and opera forms in the strict sense of the term though the western type of opera envelopes such nuances as songs and lyrics. When libretto was removed from the opera the soul of that libretto will be lost. But in the case of Tagorian opera a balance juxtaposition was sustained through the lyric and music. Even though the musical score is removed, the lyric composition remains a separate creative entity.

Tagore was of the opinion that if *Nataka* or the play is to be compared to a necklace the central string that binds all the beads should be the songs.³⁰ Despite the fact that local ballet opera hardly uses songs, the plot, choreography, use of music, use of costume, all these depict a certain degree of Tagorian influence.

There is one more aspect of the influence of Tagore in Sri Lanka cultural scene. This is seen in the establishment of the institution by the name of *Sri Palee* which meant the abode of music (the goddess of art) modelled on *Shanthi Nikethan*. The foundation stone for *Sri Palee*, was laid in the premises known as *Kapukulawatta* in *Horana*, on 20th May 1934, by Rabindranath Tagore. The song of *Sri Palee* was based on the Tagorian song titled "*Jodhi Tor Dhakshunekevuna*" which ran in Sinhala as "*Me Siri Lakdiva thum Sri Pali apey...*" written by the first principal of *Sri Palee* one Mr. W. A. S. Fonseka. On laying the foundation stone Tagore declared; "This institution which you have started... and I feel that this will be a channel of communication of hearts between your island and our institution in Bengal."³⁰

With the establishment of this seat of learning the Path was paved for the spread of Tagorian philosophy, Tagorian musical culture, Tagorian Dramatic forms, Tagorian painting styles etc., in Sri Lanka. In 1936, the renowned dance, Shanthi Dev Ghase came to Sri Lanka to take up a position as a teacher in *Sri Palee*. While teaching Indian dance forms he himself learnt Kandyan forms of traditional dancing. In 1937 a *Marathi* music maestro, named *Widhyadhar Wasalvar* came to Sri Lanka as a music teacher. The *Kathakali* dance instructor *Ananda Shivarama* from *Kerala Kala Mandala* and the Bengal painter from *Shanthi Nikethan* Khiran De, joined *Sri Palee*. The latter served as instructor in Painting form 1936 to 1938. On the other hand, such student as *Ananda Samarakoon* and *L. T. P. Manjusri* went to *Sri Palee* to study under *Khiran De*. In 1938 the painting instructor *Jayantha Lal Parak* from Bombay arrived in Sri Lanka.

The services of these artists were not confined to *Sri Palee*. They set about forming a troupe of dancers who performed in many places. As most of these dance dramas were produced by *Shanthi Dev Gosh* it could be surmised that the Tagorian theatrical influence was made to be felt by the indigenous population. In 1936 Gosh produced two dance drama titled *Sita Harana* and *Urvashi Jayam* respectively. The latter was shown at the T.M.C.A. auditorium in Colombo. He also produced a drama titled *Manohara Bandanam* which was shown at Regal Theatre Colombo on 1st July 1937. Later the play went on boards at such places as Queens Hall Galle and Broadway Hall, Matara. *Manohara Bandanam* was based on a well known *Jataka* titled *Chanda Kinnara*. This play also included the *Gahaka Wannama* of Gosh and dance of Krishna by *Ananda Shivaram*.

The dance drama titled *Chaddantha Dayam* based on *Chaddantha Jatakaya* was staged on 23rd June 1938 at Empire Hall, Colombo. In this play in addition to *Shanthi Dev Gosh*, local artists *Lakshmi Dias*, *M. C. Atygalla* and *Ananda Shivaram* took part. He had his training as a violinist there.

Subsequently *Edirivira Sarathchandra*, who was already a university lecturer went to *Shanthi Nikethan* on sabbatical leave to be trained mainly on the Sitar. Thus, quite a number of Sri Lankans had their training at *Shanthi Nikethan*. *Ganegama Saranankara*, *Madithiyawela Sumangala*, *Lional Edirisinghe*, *Devar Suryasena* and *Saranaguptha Amarasinghe* were some of the others who had the privilege of studying in *Shanthi Nikethan*.

Amongst those local poets who were inspired by the Tagorian poetic traditions.

Quite a number of works of *Rabindranath Tagore* have been translated into Sinhala.³⁴ The Tagore society in Sri Lanka was formed in 1944. Under the auspices of this society, several commemorative functions were organised mainly to create an awareness of the creative works of the poet. Poets such as *Fr. Mercelline Jayakody*, *Ananda Samarakoon* and *P. B. Alwis Perera* have written poems and lyrics in his honour.³⁵

It has also been recorded that in 1937 a certain Buddhist Monk who had such a veneration for Tagore, wrote a screenplay based on the life of the Buddha, where he wanted the poet to play the role of the Buddha.³⁶

In conclusion it is fitting to recall a comment made by Tagore when he once visited Sri Lanka. "According to the great epic *Ramayana*, when the thirty two headed *Ravana*, who forcibly took *Sita*, the wife of *Ramachandra* and hid her in this island, his followers had erected a bridge to link Sri Lanka and *Bharatha*. I myself have come from the country of *Ramachandra* in

order to erect a bridge to the best of my ability. That bridge will not be erected with stone, but with poetry, music and theatre as basic material. It is intended that this bridge will bring about a closer link between our two nations."

Foot Notes :

1. *Dinamina*, 27 October 1922.
2. *Rangana*, (the bi annual publication of the Institute of Aesthetics) Volume one, number three, 1986, p. 61.
3. Gunadasa Liyanage, *Sirikatha saha Wilmot*, 1985, Colombo, p. 45.
4. *Dinamina*, 7 March 1930.
5. Tissa Kariyawasam, *Visivasaraka Sinhala Natya saha Ranga Kalava*, 1986, Colombo, p. 166.
6. When musicians and singers were invited to perform in houses of rich men, the type of performance rendered was known by the term 'bajav'. This literally means, 'come on sing' in Hindi.
7. Udakendavala Saranankara, ed. *Navalokaya*, Ravindra Silverjubilee issue, 1961, Gampaha, p. 48.
8. Gunadasa Liyanage, op cit., p. 48.
9. *Dinamina*, 5, 14, 30 May 1934.
10. Edirivira Sarachchandra, *Pin ati sarasavi varamak denne*, 1985, Colombo, pp. 40-41.
11. *Nrtya Puja*, (A tribute to Chitrasena, 50 years in the Dance) 1986, Colombo, pp. 4-45.
12. U. Saranankara, op. cit., p. 4.
13. *Silumina*, 6 May 1956.
14. *Dinamina*, 5 May 1934.
15. *Dinamina*, 20 October 1936.
16. *The Ceylon Daily News*, 21 May 1934.
17. See, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, *Speeches and Writing*, 1963, Colombo, pp. 532-534.
18. Indira Devi Choudarani, *Gita Panchsati*, 1959, India, See preface.
19. *His Master's Voice Sampurna Sinhala Record Laistuva*, 1956, Maradana, pp 22-23.
20. Kshnisha Roay, *Gurudev Rabindranath*, 1961, India.
21. See. Sunil Ariyaratne, *Gramophone gee yugaya*, 1986, Colombo, pp. 56-103.
22. Fr. M. Jayakody, 'The national anthem', *CDN*, 16 February 1971.
23. Sunil Shantha, *Deshiya Sangithaya*, 1953, Jaela, p. 7.

24. See (1) Sunil Shantha, *Song Folio*, 1948, Colombo,
(2) Sunil Shantha, *Song Lanka*, 1950, Colombo.
25. *Depano*, is such an experiment on the operatic form.
26. *Nrtya Puja*, pp. 44-45.
27. Sri Palee, (Golden Jubilee souvenir, 1984, Colombo) p. 21.
28. I. Choudarani, Op. cit., preface.
29. *Nrtya Puja*, p. 49.
30. I Choudarani, op. cit. Preface.
31. *Sri Palee*, p. 65.
32. *Dinamina*, 2 July 1937.
33. Reference is made to the following works:
 - (i) Manjusri, *Tapal Kantoruva* (a translation of the play *Post Office*)
 - (ii) Wickramasinghe, *Chitra* (a translation of the play *Citra*)
 - (iii) Maskorala, *Bilipuja* (a translation of *Sacrifice*)
 - (iv) Gunawardhana, *Chandalika* (a translation of the play *Chandalika*)
 - (v) Alwis, *Adasanda* (a translation of the prose poem *Crescent Moon*)
 - (vi) Hemantha, *Pemtilina*, (a translation of the prose poem *Lover's Gift*)
34. (i) Maditiyawela Sumangala, *Tagore Charitaya* (1947).
(ii) Hubert Dissanayake, *Ravindranath Tagore* (1968).
35. Reference is made to the following songs :
 - (1) Tagore Maha Kivinda—sung Latha, lyrics by Fr. Jayakody.
 - (2) Shantha amadhar—sung by Samarakoon, lyric by himself.
 - (3) Palanda dasadiga kuntalave—a poem by Alwis Perera.
36. *Dinamina*, 18 August 1937.