Tagore’s *Gitanjali*: A Note on Publics of Performance

**Abstract:** Tagore’s *Gitanjali* has been written seeking inspiration from the *bhakti* tradition. The nuances of performance and reception of the tradition essentially involve two aspects- public and private. *Bhakti* as an act of personal devotion of an individual forms its ‘private’ character. The sonic performance of *bhakti* in forms such as *bhajans* addressed to Gods, accompanied by musical instruments and joyful cries of ecstasy, encompass the ‘public’ character. Both the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ are the modes of transcendental God realisation. While the ‘private’ is individual-centric, the ‘public’ can be understood in the sense of the integration of the individual with the Universal or the finite with the Infinite. The modes of publics of performance rely on transcendental collective shared experience as a catalyst of self-transformation and as an agent fostering national and universal brotherhood. This paper presents the case for incorporating publics of performance in the pedagogy for the study of *Gitanjali*, as a text of *bhakti* tradition. This would involve techniques like the inclusion of a CD demonstrating the rhythmic flow of reading, providing guidance on pronunciation, intonation, emphasis, punctuation and groupings of words and phrases. The trainers, on a more dedicated note, can evolve innovative teaching techniques such as a ‘literary jagran’ and perform a
collective public reading accompanied by traditional musical instruments of the *bhakti* tradition such as cymbals and *dholaks*.

**Keywords**: Gitanjali, Rabindranath Tagore, *Bhakti* Movement, Performance Aesthetics, Publics of Performance

The British rule in India initiated a transformational course of socio-cultural assimilation and adaptation bringing forth amalgamated products of new thought such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj in the society; and the Bengal Renaissance in literature. The acquaintance of the Indian literary tradition with the West restructured our literary sensibilities bringing about an East-West amalgamation. However, the works of Rabindranath Tagore retain the unchanging ethos of the Indian civilization amidst such change. Even the most rejuvenated of his songs, resonate the eternal beat of the Indian philosophic tradition, combining the most sublime of thoughts with the most mellifluous grace. It is no wonder that, upon his arrival in London W.B Yeats had confided to Ezra Pound stating Tagore was, “someone greater than any of us”. Tagore’s belief in the primal oneness of mankind undoubtedly stems from the Indic philosophy and restores tous the universal ideal of becoming one with our fellow beings. It was his profound love for humanity; his vision of a world unaffected by bounds of ‘narrow domestic walls’; which came back to him manifold accompanied by an impressive cavalcade of international supporters, promoters and advocates eventually fetching him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. He bore in his heart, an unbroken tradition of an apparently crumbling culture, converging the national tradition with the universal in cohesion. His intensely spiritual songs are an aesthetic fusion of the Indian with the Universal and are an embodiment of
archetypal oneness of thought. His songs arise from a blending of the awakened Bengal renaissance, inspired by Western thought, mixed with the indigenous Indian flavor of the intense bhakti tradition.

Tagore translated his poems from Bengali into English and shaped Gitanjali, which wraps up his influence of Upanishadic thoughts, Bengali Vaishnav poets and most prominently of the bhakti tradition of India. The bhakti movement of medieval India was characterized by a large number of saint-poets writing for social reforms, as sadhakas (meditators) in the name of God to serve the people. They were often anti-establishment, and against the authoritarian monastic order. The histography of the bhakti movement emanates from the Indian philosophical and religious thoughts traced back to the Vedas. The Upasanakandas of Vedas are regarded as the source of the bhakti-marga and the Aranyakarecommends ‘upasana’ for Vanaprastha bramins which is deemed to have later developed into the bhakti cult. During the medieval period, the Hindudecadence on account of the Mughal influence and internal conflicts lead to a religious renaissance called bhakti movement. The bhakti tradition is full of admiration, gratitude and reverence for God and his beauteous Creation.

The idea of bhakticanbe understood inthe sense oftwo dimensions: public and private. Bhakti as an act of personal devotion of an individual forms its ‘private’ character. However, the aesthetics of performance in terms of songs and prayers sung to God, which may even be accompanied by dance are an integral part of the bhakti tradition. Even the personal performances of bhakti can be regarded as a manifestation of a public performances addressed to God as the audience. Shankara, in Shivananda-lahiri expresses bhakti, through a metaphor of
Abhinava gupta in his treatise on rasa, examines the relationship between rasa or the ‘flavours’ of performance such as love, fear, pity and anger with bhakti, the ‘key experience of life’.

The literary tradition of bhakti is thus linked to the aesthetics of performance and reception. The most sublime text of this tradition, the Ramayana relates to this curious fact. The narrative of Ramayana which has a lush history of orature testifies the publics of reception. It is so recounted that Valmiki before embarking upon narrating the great epic, sat meditating on death, asatonement for his sins. Sitting alone he despondently, repeated the word “mara” (meaning dead in Sanskrit), while chanting continuously he gradually transposed the syllables and unintentionally thus meditated upon Lord “rama”. It was thus his mere uttering the name of the savior Rama, rather unknowingly, with his heart brimming with bhakti, which redeems him of his sins. The performance of sonic, aural and auditory role along with bhakti, thus together form the two key ingredients of the aesthetics of reception. Thus, the tradition bhakti or the universal devotional sentiment goes hand in hand with aural performance and orature. The Sanskrit advocates have recommended the aural performance of mantras in its genealogy and historicity throughout.

In the context of this tradition the pedagogy of studying Gitanjali should incorporate a rhythmic reading of the poems as an integral part of the study. This can be done by a teacher reading out the poem to the students; or the students reciting the poem to the teacher; or by alternating reading by a collective group of students. The obligation of publishers on this front should inclusion of a CD demonstrating the rhythmic flow of reading, providing guidance on pronunciation, intonation, emphasis, punctuation and groupings of words and phrases. They can also include the original Bengali version of the poems, apart from the translated English
account. It is therefore clear that comprehension and paraphrase is only one dimension to the study of Gitanjali, or literature of the classical tradition, for that matter. A comprehensive study of Gitanjali must necessarily include an auditory performance.

Tagore had written various letters to his kin in which he expresses doubt on the quality of his translation in doing justice to his original work. In letters written to the poetess Amiya Chakravarty his secretary at that time he frankly admits:

>You must have received those signed books of mine by now. I was struck when I glanced through them by how careless my translations were. I did not give enough time to thinking about the extent to which their essence can be lost through a change of language – I feel ashamed now. (Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali: Song Offerings)

Like everyone else, Tagore could not have escaped the transmutation associated with translation, yet without has translating his stupendous book of songs would not have been available for public reception, adulation and collective benefit. The so perceived individuality of Gitanjali thus compromised for its ‘universality’ – greater cause vindicates Tagore profusely. However, an auditory experience of the original poems written in Bengali can thus be most elevating for a motivated learner, in continuity of the bhakti tradition.

Further, reading the poem as a public event, with respect to the Indic tradition, in a so to say literary –jagran, with the readers reading keeping their shoulders upright and back straight, reading moderately and unassuming can likewise draw in the message more easily and harmoniously; moving forth in their journey from the individual to the collective. The publics of collective recitation thus brings forth a transcendental collective shared experience
facilitating the integration of the finite and the infinite. The nuanced \textit{bhakti} paradigm being that when one speaks from the mouth, while his heart full of devotional sentiment or \textit{bhakti} and when he does so collectively, he shares a collective transcendence and the publics of aesthetic performance, as a sublime act of transcendence. Samuel Rogers raises a similar appeal:

\begin{quote}
The soul of music slumbers in the shell
Till waked and kindled by the master’s spell And feeling hearts – touch them but rightly- pour

A thousand melodies unfelt before.
\end{quote}

The prophetic vision on the reception of \textit{Gitanjali}, is corresponding to the public appeal of performance:

\begin{quote}
These verses.... as the generations pass, traveler will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers while they wait one another, shall find in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherin their own more better passion may bathe and renew its youth....
\end{quote}

Tagore himself sings of unleashing his soulful wordless adulation for God in ecstatic, joyful sonorous prayer:

\begin{quote}
In the pulsing life of dance, 
To thee I raise
In wordless praise
\end{quote}
My eager body’s rhythmed cry –

This new birth’s eloquence
In music and in gesture shines

My worship, Lord

Tagore seems to resonate the tradition of the bhakti poets who encouraged collective adulation in praise of God, inviting all bhakts or devotees to sing bhajans together, accompanied by sonorous musical instruments such as cymbals and dholaks (small drums), unleashing cries of joyful ecstasy instead of the stringent rules of raag and taal. He candidly declares in song VII:

My song has put off her adornments.
She has no pride of dress and decoration.
Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers.

My poet’s vanity dies in shame before thy sight.
O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.
Besides the publics of performance within institutional settings or beyond cuts across social hierarchies, physical boundaries building in a sort of carnivalesque-like atmosphere where the devotees are bound by a sublime shared experience, overlook the disparity of caste, race, social position, economic status etc. Tagore too shares this idea in *Gitanjali*: Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.

Therefore, the publics of performance and reading of Gitanjali can act an agent fostering self-transformation, national unity and universal fraternity. The pedagogy of publics of performance has a far more profound role to play than mere comprehension focused model.
Works Cited


Print.