

Tagore never adhered to stylistic categories. Rather, he broke them and created a new genre of his own, encouraging others also to experiment and try new forms of expression. In today's dance world, there is a pre-occupation with categories- Classical or contemporary? Kuchipudi or Bharatanatyam? Traditional or modern? I tried to go with Tagore's philosophy when choreographing, less concerned with categories, and more with communication and genuine expression. Dance is perhaps the best medium to cut across barriers, to share poetry with those who may not necessarily know the language, but all can connect with the meaning shown through body language.

I choreographed two pieces for Happenings Festival 2011- a solo version of the dance-drama 'Chitrangada' and a Thillana in Raag Desh incorporating the song 'Esho Shyamolo Shundoro'. The first song and final songs of Chitrangada are especially poignant- In the first song- 'Mohini Maya Elo', Tagore evokes the essence, the theme of the story- 'Come unadorned beauty, come humble truth. Strike down the fortress of dreams and illusion, bring liberation, tear asunder the bondage of deception.' The final song is a remarkable poem describing Tagore's ideal woman, and his idea of the perfect man-woman companionship, relevant even today nearly 100 years after it was written.

I used the original Bengali poetry, without translating to Telugu, and tried to retain the Kuchipudi lilt, drama, and look in the dance. Kuchipudi is generally fast-paced, light-footed, with fleeting emotions. Many of Tagore's poems are slower, emphasizing the weight and depth of an emotion. Rather than recreate the entire dance-drama, I choose the sections of Chitrangada that seemed the most significant turning points in the story, and those which most vividly brought out the character that Tagore created. The other piece I choreographed was a Thillana including the song 'Esho Shyamolo Shundoro'- a song of rain- appropriate for the monsoon season when Happenings is held- and in Raga Desh, a raga common to both Carnatic and Hindustani music.

Bengali is perhaps furthest removed from the characteristic speed and lilt of this dance

form, but the closest to my heart. I, too, am a 'Bong'! My mother was a graduate of Tagore's Viswa Bharati in Bolpur, and my father grew up entirely in Kolkata. We were raised speaking Bengali at home, even while growing up in Washington, D.C., where I began training in Kuchipudi with Anuradha Nehru. Over the years, my Bengali family has looked a bit puzzled while I happily practised my Kuchipudi to the Telugu dance songs I was taught! Creating pieces in Bengali for Kuchipudi at Happenings was fulfilling at many levels- some personal, others professional.

A common acting technique in Kuchipudi is that of one dancer taking on several roles in the story. Often, the dancer simply turns to indicate a change of character. The emphasis is on internalized character development- satvika abhinaya- rather than costume- aharya abhinaya. I used this technique here, focusing on the character of Chitrangada, with minimal exposition of other characters of the story. I wanted to condense the story and find the essence of the character, without over-acting, without falling back on well-known ways of expressing. The songs, the pace, the story line, the characters, had to be established without the aid of the usual costume changes for the characters of 'Surupa' (pretty Chitrangada) and 'Kurupa' (ugly Chitrangada). It is the same woman, the same soul, with different external forms.

The Kuchipudi repertoire today has many famous pieces such as Bhamakalapam, Dashavatar, and Tarangam, which were originally part of larger dance dramas. The plays are abridged and formatted and excerpted to suit the solo dancer in performance on stage. The interpretation of Chitrangada I presented for Happenings was also a move in this direction. It was a solo version of Chitrangada, in which the dancer focusses mainly on the character of the warrior princess Chitrangada. The dancer also briefly takes on the role of Arjun during the second half.

The Desh thillana with 'Esho Shyamolo Shundoro...' was an experiment to see what would result when Carnatic music is combined with Rabindra Sangeet. Tagore has most often been translated to Telugu before being used by Kuchipudi dancers. In this

piece, we combined Bengali lyrics with a Carnatic musical piece. To keep the usual pace of Kuchipudi movements, I did speed up some of the songs slightly. Explaining the meaning of the Bengali, word by word to the Carnatic musicians was a challenge, but the enthusiasm with which the Carnatic musicians approached the project, reinforced for me the power of Tagore's work

One of the secrets of great dance is having great collaborators and musicians. Though they sit on the side of the stage, musicians are central to the performance. A singer's creative rendition of the line, or a mridangam player's well-timed percussion creates heightened impact for a viewer. It is a two-way collaboration- which artist leads- the dancer or the musician- is difficult to distinguish. Both singers- Kuldeep Pai (Carnatic) and Sounak Chatterjee (Rabindra Sangeet)- were excellent. Kuldeep's composition of the Carnatic Thillana fit perfectly with the original Tagore song, and the pacing and placement of one verse of Carnatic with one verse of 'Esho Shyamolo...' created a beautiful piece of music which gave the impetus for good dancing.

The choreography will keep evolving. I re-choreographed the pieces for a group, to perform in New Delhi in March 2012, and it was received warmly. It was something totally new for me and for Kuchipudi dance. I have performed the Desh Thillana with Esho Shyamolo Shundoro in nearly all of my solo performances in the past one year after making it for Happenings. Most recently I performed the Desh Thillana in Kalamandalam, Kerala, in September 2012, where it was unlikely that anyone in the audience understood Bengali. Yet, Tagore's poetry communicated clearly to them.

The Happenings festival was an opportunity to delve deeper into the work of Tagore, and to understand his genius. Reading of his life and work was inspiring. I am deeply grateful to the Happenings team which was warm and supportive- an ideal organizer. Particularly the performance at Tepantar, in Bordhoman district was unforgettable, and a brilliant way to take Tagore to the masses.



Kuchipudi has evolved from its origins in dance-drama traditions of Andhra Pradesh. Traditionally, men of certain families from the village named 'Kuchipudi' used to travel the Tamil and Andhra countryside presenting musical plays which included a lot of dancing. In the 1940's and 50's, after India's independence, when there was a renewed interest in preserving and promoting the dance forms of India. At this time, Kuchipudi spread out of the villages of Andhra, into the cities, especially Hyderabad and Chennai. Gurus of traditional Kuchipudi families moved to the big cities, taught their art widely, and found fame on the city stage and in the movies. What used to be performed only by Brahmin men, started being taught to women and men of all classes. What used to be only dance dramas performed in large troupes overnight in village maidaans or temple festivals, became a solo repertoire performed for a short evening on the city's proscenium stages.



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