



***READING BODIES MOVING TEXTS: EXPLORING TEACHING
LEARNING METHODOLOGIES THROUGH EMBODIED
PRACTICES***

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Abstract: This paper intends to look at body or rather a dancing body not merely as another form of entertainment enhancing the pleasure of mind, but as a seminal vehicle for the dissemination of art and education. It explores dance's role as a tool, an interpreter, a translator of the rhythm of nature and the aesthetic of life, and how conveyance of ideas become more significant than the lingual translation. When the entire nation history is being re-written by the new government policies and the New Education Policy 2020 fleetingly mentions the importance of dance among the other subjects of the so called multidisciplinary university curriculum and education as means for character and nation building, it is even more necessary to explore dance's role as an intellectually stimulant as well as a physically challenging activity to establish a communicative and aesthetic language within the embodied practices. The paper not only investigates how these creative experiments aim at bridging the gap between the mind and the body and the verbal and the nonverbal, but also searches for dance's identity within the context of the cultural- pedagogical agenda seeking to consolidate the learning- teaching process.

Keywords: Embodied Practice, Holistic Education, Pedagogy, Space, Creative Joy

Introduction

This paper intends to look at body or rather a dancing body not merely as another form of entertainment enhancing the pleasure of mind, but as a seminal vehicle for the dissemination of art and education. It explores dance's role as a tool, an interpreter, a translator of the rhythm of nature and the aesthetic of life, and how conveyance of ideas become more significant than the lingual translation. The urge of translating or expressing our emotions and hidden feelings through free bodily movements is felt even more strongly in the present scenario, the unprecedented world crisis where even our everyday movements are curtailed to a large extent.

When the entire nation history is being re-written by the new government policies and the New Education Policy 2020 fleetingly mentions the importance of dance among the other subjects of the so called multidisciplinary university curriculum and "education as means for character and nation building"¹ it is even more necessary to explore dance's role as an intellectually stimulant as well as a physically challenging activity to establish a communicative and aesthetic language within the embodied practices. How does dance become a means for complete student development and not an end in itself? What role does a moving body play as a tool of education within university spaces? The paper not only investigates how these creative experiments aim at bridging the gap between the mind and the body and the verbal and the nonverbal, but also searches for dance's identity within the context of the cultural- pedagogical agenda seeking to consolidate the learning- teaching process. As a case study of this research the paper looks at the politics and pedagogy of a certain style of dance within a certain university space, Santiniketan (1901) as an educational project that eventually became Visva-Bharati, an experimental space for Rabindranath Tagore's larger visions of using dance

¹ Srivastava, R. (2020, 31 July). "The RSS Impact of New Education Policy". *India Today*, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/new-education-policy-rss-sangh-parivar-impact-sanskrit-1706340-2020-07-31>

as a tool of his idea of holistic education bringing the body and mind together in the process of explorations through music, poetry, drama and dance.

Everyday life experiences to free bodily movements: Theory and practice

According to Tagore's philosophy of education, music and dance should not be mere entertainment, but an integral core of our existence. He might not ever follow or show interest in constructing a specific grammar for his ideas/ ideal of dance but from the very beginning he made sure of imbedding free bodily movements within the everyday life practices and vice versa. Not confining within the limitation of bookish knowledge he encouraged his students to search for rhythm in music, in nature, in everyday life and enrich their quality of life with these intimate learning processes. Tagore was not a professional dancer and did not have a clear end goal as far as the dance was concerned, yet he had the courage and immense enthusiasm in understanding and experimenting with the new bodies and bringing bringing/ putting classroom in a different kind of everyday. Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty's theory on body politics and everyday life can be referred in this context. Kirsten Simonsen discusses in her article "Bodies, Sensations, Space and Time" that what we have got from Lefebvre is a "conceptual effort calling attention to human capacities and creativities involved in an 'authentic' everyday life, and a focus on the spatiality and the temporality of the body." She further discusses:

Merleau-Ponty adds something to Lefebvre when it comes to a careful philosophical working-through of issues of the body. In his philosophy of embodiment, he developed a sensuous phenomenology of lived experience, located in the space between mind and body, or subject and object - the intersubjective space of perception and the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to Lefebvre the human body is unique in playing a dual role both as the vehicle of perception and

the object perceived, as the body-in-the-world, which 'knows' itself by virtue of its active relation to this world. This duality or ambiguity of the body as perceiving-perceived is central to Merleau-Ponty's work and, at the level of practice, may be related to Lefebvre's ideas of the duality of social space relative to the body, as simultaneously part of the constitution of the self and mediator to the perception of something else. (10)

Dance historian Susan Leigh Foster in her essay "Choreographing History" (1998:180) writes, "A body sitting, writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing. Its habits and stances, gestures and demonstrations, every action of its various regions, areas, and parts--- all these emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning." Tagore's engagement with dance also grew out of his search for a dance pedagogy based on his creative urge to establish a communicative and aesthetic language within the embodied practices. The body therefore becomes the mediator between the inner space and the outer space- starting as the tool for externalizing the images formed in the mind and shaped in the consciousness before coming to the external space and being visible through the experience of the body itself. She further writes in the introduction of *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture and Power* (1996), "Bodies do not only pass meaning along in their uniquely responsive way. They develop choreographies of signs through which they discourse: They run (or lurch, or bound, or feint, or meander...) from premise to conclusion; they confer with (or rub up against, or bump into...) one another in narrating their own physical fate..." The body therefore becomes the site for the transcendental activities of the mind or soul, the symbolic understanding, hence, a site for translation of movements into metaphors. Externalization of mind's communications through bodily movements into

images formulated with the help of the movements in their turn, create meaning for the audience. ...

Dance played a very significant role in Rabindranath's discovery of the body. For example, he noticed the beauty of the human body in Japanese dance. Commenting on a dance performance he saw during his 1916 visit, Tagore wrote: "It was a song of the body. There were no breaks in the movements of the dancers as they flowed from one position to another; the body, like a creeping vine in full blossom, swung as a whole, showering the flowers of beauty." ... As a writer, playwright, and director he played a role in reintroducing the body, especially the female body into high culture. Getting middle and upper class women to act and dance on stage was a social shift more than a professional innovation. But perhaps more important was the fact, that as a part of the festivities in Santiniketan he got the boys and girls of his school to dance and experience the expressive potentialities of their own bodies from within. Such an awareness and acceptance of the body also informed his paintings and drawings.

Dance as education, dance in education: Locating dance within a university space

Tagore's creation of a narrative style of balletic representation was set at a juncture of dance and theatre, and was developed by him for a specific purpose for a specific arena--- that of an emerging space of a new university. Pulak Dutta opines:

Visva Bharati was established with a very different form, aim and functions. Rabindranath thought that the primary function of the universities was the production of knowledge, distribution of it was secondary. He writes, '...the primary function of our university should be the constructive work of knowledge... Education can only become

natural and wholesome when it is the direct fruit of a living and growing knowledge.’
Thus the idea of Visva Bharati was born.” (81-82)

For Tagore, dance was not only an art aimed at pleasure, but of significant educational value. Along with music and drama, through dance and dance drama too Tagore sought to impart his educational ideas and the principles of knowledge creation. Whether it helps one to withstand the ordeals of life or not, but it is true that Tagore referred to the initial teachings of dance as a physical exercise with the accompaniment of music. I would definitely agree with the opinion of Avik Ghosh[In a personal interview taken by me in 2015], former student and faculty of Patha-Bhavana, who has years of experience both in performing in and directing the drama of Tagore, that the dance Tagore innovated in and for Santiniketan goes a long way in shaping a person’s individuality and promises to turn him or her into a more active and confident person in the struggles of life It is especially because this dance has the capability of fulfilling the main ideal of education, namely to capture man’s expression, free his soul from concealment and unite one with the other. In the “Thoughts on Education” he himself admits, “I believed that the object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom.” For him freedom was not merely a sense of independence, but perfect freedom lay “in the perfect harmony of relationship which we realize in this world--- not through our response to it by knowing but in being” (The Centre of Indian Culture 469) and of course by doing. Dance acts as a catalyst in the expression of not only this freedom of mind, but also in the freedom of heart, will, and most importantly body. That is why Tagore placed so much importance on free bodily movements as a part of this entire process of complete being as well as an integral part of holistic education Tagore aimed at in Santiniketan. This is one of the most significant reasons why in spite of

not being a professional dancer himself Tagore can be seen as a visionary of modern dance in India. He had envisioned what after so many years Alma M. Hawkins explains in 1982 in *Modern Dance in Higher Education*:

Modern dance as education achieves its most significant results through the growth of individuals--- growth resulting in more mature and effective behavior... The educator starts with the student and aims to shape dance experiences so that they contribute to the student's development as an individual; but throughout this process he constantly strives to help the student enlarge his understanding of dance as an art form and become increasingly proficient in technique and creative expression. Dance, then, becomes a means for student development, not an end in itself. (37)

She explains the importance of pedagogy of dance as education and dance in education the way Tagore had envisioned much earlier.

Conclusion

It would be appropriate to conclude this paper with what Ojeya Cruz Banks argues in the context of West African dance education that “the intersection between research in dance education and critical pedagogy underscores how cultural power is negotiated through dance practices. A critical pedagogy of dance takes issue with the way dancers' bodies have historically been objectified in the many technique classes.” According to her a critical pedagogical style argues for using dance to “empower students to develop a critical understanding of their worlds.” (3) Tagore played a very important role in bringing a change in the attitude towards bodily engagement as a process of expressing and communicating through performance. He not only aimed for holistic education and a modern secular society which “would work at minimizing discriminations on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicity, and last but not the least,

gender,” (Sarkar Munsii 220) but also paved a way for practicing it in real life. He managed to create an awareness and acceptance among a large group of people who came in touch with him and his institution, about “equal participation of both genders on stage, and about dance as an art of the respectable members of the Indian society.”

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