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The Travels of *Chitrangada* and Tagore's Philosophy

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Abstract: 'Chitrangada', in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, is the story of a warrior princess of the secluded kingdom of Manipur. Arjuna, the third Pandava, meets her during his exile and wants to marry her. After initial disapproval of the king he marries her under certain conditions. Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* is based on this story. But it has been transformed by Tagore and is a reflection of his humanist philosophy as well as a strong feminist outlook. Chitrangada, as a Tagorean heroine is a strong woman who chooses to establish her identity risking losing the man she desires. She had been raised as a prince, but in course of time she breaks free of this bondage and asserts her femininity. She spends her life estranged from her beloved, raising her child on her own.

The story of Chitrangada has travelled far and wide. It has been interpreted and adapted in various ways. It has found expressions in different forms and a variety of languages. A very interesting adaptation has been late director Rituparno Ghosh's contemporary film *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* in the year 2012. In this paper I have tried to trace the transformations of the story of *Chitrangada* through the ages...from the Puranas of the Vedic Period to the dance drama written by Rabindranath Tagore; and from there to the film by Rituparno Ghosh. In this journey Tagore's drama plays a pivotal role. I have dwelled mainly on Tagore's philosophy reflected in the drama against the backdrop of the social scenario of that time. I have also tried to analyse how Tagore's philosophical perspective has influenced the making of this film.

Key Words: truth, beauty, finite- infinite, Tagore, spirituality

Chitrangada in Mahabharata scripted by Ved Vyasa is the story of a princess, who is one of Arjuna's wives. While on exile for twelve years and on *Bramhacharya*, Arjuna, the third among the Pandavas, visits the mystic kingdom of Manipur. There he chances upon Chitrangada, the heir princess, and wishes to marry her. Her father, the King of Manipur, does not agree to the proposal as Chitrangada was the heir to the throne and being a matrilineal society, the child borne to her would become the future ruler of the state. Arjuna finally marries her on condition that Chitrangada would not accompany him on his way back to his own kingdom and also he would not have any claim upon the child born of this union. A son was born to Chitrangada and Arjuna, whom they named Babruvahana. Babruvahana succeeded his grandfather as king of Manipur. Later, Chitrangada's son, Babruvahana, fails to recognize Arjuna, and defeats him in battle.

Inspired and intrigued by her persona, Rabindranath Tagore, gave a new dimension to the story, turning it into a play in the year 1892. Tagore's *Chitrangada* is a lyrical expression of love, illusion and conquest and one of the strongest gender statements ever made in Indian literature. More importantly, it is a reflection of his philosophical thoughts. In his philosophical outlook, Tagore is an idealist, yet he is a humanist as well as a naturalist. He preaches man to seek eternal truth, removing the veils of material truth which is apparently more attractive to the ignorant. For the knowledgeable, the real truth is like sunlight void of any vibrant colour or in the broader sense is over and above sensuous perception. This is the theme of *Chitrangada* as narrated by Tagore.

Chitrangada's story has since then travelled in time as well as in space. It has been staged innumerable times and continues to be a favourite among Bengalis. Outside Bengal, Tagore's *Chitrangada* has been adapted, translated and staged across India in many languages like Oriya, Marathi and Tamil. Very recently, in 2012, we see another transformation of *Chitrangada* in Rituparno Ghosh's film, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*. The film is neither an adaptation nor an appropriation of Tagore's *Chitrangada*. It is rather an interpretation of Tagorean Philosophy underlying the dance drama. It tells the story of a choreographer who is struggling with his gender identity. However, Tagore's ideology helps him in finding his path. I will at first analyse the dance drama and then move on to the film.

In the prologue to the drama, Tagore says: when the dawn breaks, the sky appears red as it touches upon eyes yet to awake from slumber. Gradually the redness clears up to reveal a bright, colourless morning which shines upon the world, now fully awake. Similarly, truth or true knowledge always appears before us with external decorations. Its colourful and flamboyant exterior is very attractive and appealing to the unrefined mind. But finally truth reveals itself tearing away this attractive veil. To the refined and knowledgeable mind it expounds itself fully. This drama unfolds the yearnings of first love, its bindings and desire. But, ultimately the play ends with freedom from this mysticism on perceiving the truth as it is, truth which is not shrouded by mystery.

The story proceeds thus: The king of Manipur is given a boon by Shiva that his clan will have sons only; in spite of that

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when Chitrangada, a princess is born, she is brought up as a “prince” fit to rule the land and a person unparalleled in archery, warfare and governance. She dresses as a man and is the protector of her territory. The beautiful yet secluded kingdom of Manipur is fiercely guarded by her. While on a penance for twelve years, Arjuna visits Manipur. Hunting in the forests with her consorts, Chitrangada beholds him, falls in love at first sight and appeals to him for marriage. But unmoved by her physical appearance, Arjuna refuses, saying he is on *Bramhacharya*. Spurned and rejected, Chitrangada is deeply hurt. She cannot accept the refusal. Her yearning for Arjuna leads her to seek the blessings of the God of Love, Madana. Madana grants her exquisite beauty for one year, the weapon with which she aims to subjugate Arjuna.

A beautiful Chitrangada finally charms Arjuna but with time she feels suffocated under the burden of borrowed beauty. She desires Arjuna without the trappings of a temporary identity. She eventually decides to shed her pseudo beauty and be herself. In the conclusion, Arjuna welcomes Chitrangada in her uniqueness as he is no more attracted by only physical beauty but is fascinated by her personality and qualities. Their marriage is of two equals based on mutual love and respect.

Two aspects of Tagore’s thoughts and realizations are inherent in this story: a) the social aspect which has an underlying feminist approach, and b) the philosophical aspect. Tagore rejected narrowness of thought that separated human beings from one another. He believed in education, social respect and empowerment for women. In his writings Tagore revealed the unequal social structure that appraised women and therefore he created courageous women who challenged tradition. Chitrangada desires to be an equal consort to the man of her choice while retaining her true identity. She is a strong woman, who lives up to her father’s expectations, protects her country, pursues her love and brings up a child, all by herself. The story of Chitrangada in Mahabharata hints at a matrilineal society. Tagore harps upon this; in his dance drama he makes it clear from the beginning that Chitrangada, the girl child, was not her father’s natural or first choice. She was a child born of broken dreams and expectations. The child was born defying Lord Shiva’s boon which had promised “sons only” in that kingdom.

As a result, Chitrangada was trained to fit into the role of an unborn brother. She was camouflaged as a male child to make her acceptable as a ruler. She plays this role to perfection. She does not defy her father and lives up to his expectations. Thus Tagore portrays the social scenario of that time which is male dominated. Yet, being a Tagore heroine, Chitrangada rises out of this male subjugation, and establishes herself as a female ruler, who is loved and respected by her subjects. This trait of leadership is very strong in Chitrangada’s character. She never leaves her fellowmen for her husband’s home, because she has duties to fulfill and promises to keep.

On the other, Tagore as a philosopher has often been described as a humanist. In his philosophy man has been given a very key status. Tagore says that an insight into the nature of man clearly reveals the fact that there are two essential aspects of his nature, a lower one and a higher one, the physical and the spiritual. The physical or biological aspect of man is his finite self whereas the other aspect can be designated as the ‘**Surplus**’ in man or his infinite self. The most usual way of describing this is to say that **man is finite-infinite**. Man combines in himself the physical nature with the spiritual nature. These thoughts of Tagore are reflected in his story.

Positivists, Scientists and persons with an exclusively empirical bent of mind believe in only the finite aspect of self because the infinite self is not perceivable. There are others, certain cynics and ascetics, for whom the true nature of man is his infinite self. But Tagore feels that both these views are one sided and defective. Both nature of man are real and true for him. The empirically oriented thinkers who reject the spirituality of man by calling it imaginary do not realise that there are many aspects of reality that are not open to scientific insight. There are many aspirations and urges which transcend physicality. There are things that the scientific insight comes across but is not able to explain. Scientists cannot explain why we are thrilled by a work of art or overjoyed by sweet music. They cannot determine reasons for love and compassion. So, it is not proper to deny the reality of higher self

Tagore is also critical of those thinkers who deny the reality of finite self. The finite self represents the self which sustains life in this world. Moreover, Tagore says that a rejection of the finite self will naturally mean a rejection of the Infinite self also, because it is in and through the finite that the infinite is sought to be realised. If the finite self is rejected, self would become void, and there would not remain any basis of the Infinite.

Tagore therefore chooses to call man finite-infinite. Man is actually *individual-universal*. Every individual has his own peculiarities on account of which he is different from other individuals. These constitute his individual characters. But he also has a nature which he shares with all and on this account he develops a kinship with fellow humans. This is the universality in him. This also shows his finite-infinite self. In order to understand this better let us explore each aspect of man separately.

The finite self has three different aspects. There are certain distinct characters as follows:

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1. It has an embodied existence. Its foremost tendency is *acquisition*. The finite self derives immense pleasure by 'possessing' or 'acquiring'. It has instinctive and mechanical ways of behaviour like an animal. Like animals man is also conscious of himself. He is motivated by self satisfaction and self preservation.
2. Another very prominent aspect of the finite existence of man is a very keenly developed ego-sense. That is why the finite self wishes to maintain his uniqueness at all cost. Moreover, possession of rationality is a unique privilege of man. So, even in his finite nature man is evidently superior to other aspects of existence.
3. The most important character is that, it is the finite self that grows and develops into the infinite. The finite self itself has the spiritual potentialities. An analysis of human desires show that they are not always ego-centric, they aim at the realisation of some social good. Man is essentially always trying to improve himself.....to excel.

The finite nature of man is, according to Tagore the real aspect of man. By infinite nature of man Tagore refers to the element of divinity present within man. It constantly impels the individual to go beyond. It yearns for *mukti* or immortality. No other creature aspires for immortality, but man somehow has this feeling in spite of his obvious experience of the phenomenon of death. It is the personality of a man conscious of its inexhaustible abundance, it has the paradox in it that it is more than itself, it is more than it is seen, as it is seen, as it is used. This side of man's nature is **creative, dynamic and ever growing**. By creativity Tagore does not mean mere capacity to construct something new. Creativity is the capacity of having and giving expression to novel ideas. In that sense man has an artist hidden in him. Growth follows from creativity. Not only bodily growth, the growth of personality ensures that man is always active.

Another important characteristic of this aspect of man's nature is *freedom*. Man enjoys some amount of freedom even in the physical realm, but that according to Tagore, is like the freedom inside a cage. The physical man is basically limited by the material body. Perfect freedom, according to Tagore lies in a perfect harmony of relationship—— in the realization of the Universal within the individual.

But the most basic and perhaps the most important character of infinite man is that all its expressions and activities are expressions of *Joy*. Joy is inherent in the soul and whatever is considered to be beyond the physical is nothing but an expression of Joy. Man naturally aspires for **Truth, Goodness and Beauty** which leads to joy or complete bliss. *Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram*, culminating into *Anandam*. It is joy that makes man realise his affinity with Nature. It is joy that makes him moral or religious or noble. In the introduction to the drama Tagore speaks of attaining this Truth. Truth, along with goodness and beauty relieves a person from worldly worries and anxieties. They save a person from crises, impels him towards pure bliss. Bliss is thus the condition of spiritual growth and also the ultimate goal of man. Tagore calls this aspect of human nature- *Jivan-Devata*. It is the 'Lord of Life' because it gives 'joy' of existence, it carries the possibility and attainment of all that man constantly aspires. *Jivan- Devata* is God in man, the element that makes him God-like.

In Tagore's dance drama, *Chitrangada*, both Arjuna and Chitrangada, the main characters, go through this process of finitude to infinite, breaking the chains of physical individuality they look towards Universality and embrace pure bliss. In the initial stages they portray the real aspect of humanity. They concentrate on possession and acquisition. They are motivated by self satisfaction and realisation of ego. Chitrangada lures Arjuna by irresistible beauty which is only a façade. Biological aspect of man is portrayed by Arjuna's character who is attracted by Chitrangada's beauty. They find each other and unite.....but that is not the end! They yearn for something else. They are impelled to go beyond physicality; they are attracted towards spirituality. In this spirituality they find pure happiness. This is a continuous process.

Tagore's *Chitrangada* and his ideology is the inspiration behind Rituparno Ghosh's film. The film "*Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*" depicts the dance drama within the cinema. Rituparno portrays *Chitrangada* as a story of desires and self-realisation, evoking many thoughts and questions which are gender and identity related. In the introduction to the cinema, as a director he writes- "from Tagore's writings comes a realization". In the film there are two dimensions, two tales are being told intertwined with each other: the story of Chitrangada and story of the protagonist of this film, Rudra. Tagore's *Chitrangada* seen through Rudra's eyes is almost autobiographical.

Rudra is an engineer-turned-choreographer who works with his troupe for staging *Chitrangada*. He is a person of confused identity. Rudra's soul is that of a woman's, bound by the physicality of a man. He yearns to be a woman. For Rudra, *Chitrangada* is the story of wish fulfillment- Chitrangada's wish versus her father's wish. Chitrangada's father had wanted her to be a man. In the beginning she is conducive to it. But after meeting Arjuna, she wishes to be a woman. So, it is a play which shows, "that you can choose your own gender". In the same way, Rudra also gets an engineering degree to fulfill his father's wishes initially, but later chooses to be a dancer cum choreographer. He also wants his gender identity to be socially acceptable.

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In the course of the story, he meets Partha, a heroin addicted but talented percussionist and they enter into a passionate relationship. At the outset they are happy with each other. But this relationship does not fulfill the void within Rudra as he craves to be a mother- a culmination of womanhood. Partha suggests that they adopt a child. But this does not solve Rudra's trouble as he starts facing legal problems. Blindfolded law does not recognise the woman within him. Both of them being single males are not permitted to adopt a child. Rudra wants to become a mother at any cost. Inspired by Chitrangada's story, he decides to undergo surgery to change his gender, to be technically called a 'woman'. Partha vehemently opposes this decision. He loves Rudra as he is. But what about Rudra's desires? For Rudra they are not less important than Partha or the society. He goes against Partha's wishes, and creates further worries for his parents as well. Partha cannot accept the transformed Rudra and eventually leaves him bringing an end to their relationship. Rudra is now bereft of his emotional support. In this hour of crisis his parents stand by him. They accept him as he is, they respect his wish to become a different person altogether.

On his own during the lengthy surgical procedure of gender change a spiritual change starts developing within Rudra. He searches his soul for self-realisation. Shubho, his counselor, is probably Rudra's own inner self. Shubho helps him in his self-realisation. He symbolizes 'mangal' and 'kalyan' i.e., goodness. At one point Shubho says, "*kotota transformed hole ekta transformation ke complete bolte paro?*" – Like the Ship of Theseus- is it the same body in a transformed avatar or is it a different body altogether? Actually, transformation is an ongoing process- it can never be complete.

Rudra realizes that his true identity is that of a "vivacious, energetic, slightly eccentric choreographer"- who is loved by all those who matter to him. He starts believing in humanism as advocated by Tagore- that being a creative and dynamic human is more important than being a man or a woman. Rudra, like Chitrangada chooses to be himself. The story ends with the line- "Be what you wish to be."

Thus, Rituparno Ghosh's film is also a celebration of Tagore's philosophical outlook. The finite man craves for individual identity. He tries to different. This is true to his nature. But he also tries to transcend boundaries; searches to reach the infinite. He loses his identity and becomes one with divinity. This is also true of him. But the process is never ending for the infinite can never be limited within space and time.

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