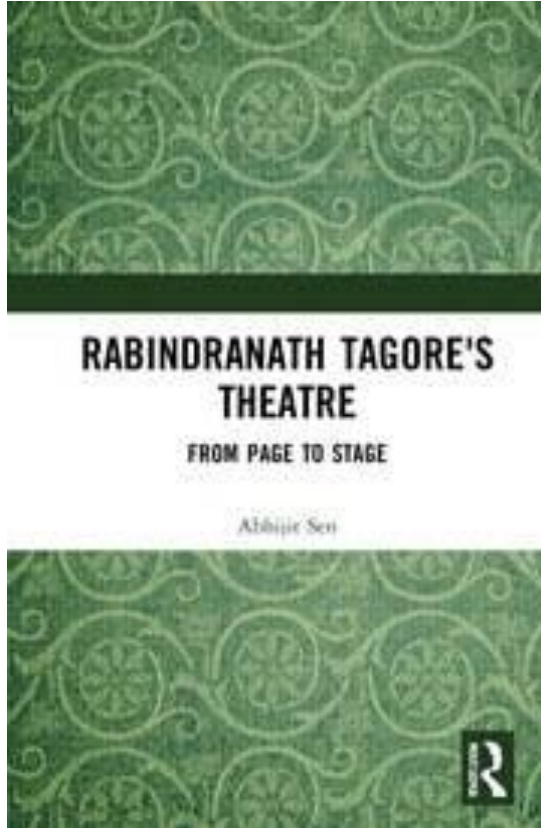


Abhijit Sen. *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 324 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-626785.



The main argument of Abhijit Sen's book, *Rabindranath Tagore's Theatre: From Page to Stage*, is that Tagore, although primarily known as a poet and songwriter, was no less a man of the theatre who experimented simultaneously with playwriting, directing, casting, rehearsing, acting, and producing for the Bengal stage between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He, in fact, created "a new model for... modern Indian theatre" (1), but his theatrical contributions have gone largely unrecognised both within and outside the academia. Further, even when he is acknowledged as a dramatist, the acknowledgement hardly goes beyond an appreciation of the philosophical and spiritual values of his plays. Neatly divided into three broad sections – the historical context, Tagore as a dramaturg and theorist, and Tagore as a theatre-practitioner – the book is a significant

intervention in filling up this longstanding gap in Tagore studies. Sen's volume strongly argues for the "stage worthiness" of Tagore's plays.

The introduction discusses Tagore's changing theories of theatre and stage practice in tandem with the shifting narratives of nationalism in the wake of India's freedom struggle. Beginning with the European realist-naturalist paradigm that is largely based on representational realism, Tagore eventually conceptualised an alternative/parallel theatre for himself and his society by drawing on various indigenous performance forms, both classical and folk. Increasingly, he worked towards an eclectic genre of theatre by interlacing a variety of performance cultures from non-Western countries, inspired by his growing "espousal of internationalism and cosmopolitanism" (85). The volume's subtitle ("From Page to Stage"), which sounds a bit hackneyed, aptly encapsulates its aim, the relationship between text and performance and the theatreness of theatre. Early in his book, Sen notes that his research is nevertheless heavily dependent on various extraneous sources in the obvious absence of any first-hand experience of the performances with Tagore himself as theatre-maker. These sources include Tagore's own notes, instructions, reviews, eyewitness accounts, and memoirs and reminiscences of his contemporaries.

Section 1 discusses the Tagore family's involvement in the Bengal Renaissance and its theatre with a view to locating historically Tagore's appearance on this larger scene. It looks back to the founding of English theatres in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the middle of the nineteenth century and the emulation of European representational aesthetics in Bengal theatre, the revivalist staging of Sanskrit plays as an attempt to reclaim native cultural and aesthetic traditions, and the Bengali elite's hostility towards indigenous/popular forms of performance which appeared un-dramatic and vulgar to them. The nineteenth-century Bengal stage also accommodated three different forms of theatre: the historical, inspired by the nationalist spirit of the age; the mythological, popularised by Hindu revivalism and the teachings of Ramakrishna; and the social, catalysed by conflicts in contemporary Bengal society. Instead of towing any of these lines as such, even though a few of his plays dealt with some thematically, Tagore "moved in a different direction" to find out his own form (27). No wonder his plays were often criticised, sometimes by the stalwarts of Bengal theatre, for being obscure and effete. Many of his contemporaries missed the wider cultural and aesthetic dimensions of his theatre that sought to avoid the overtly political, religious, and social character of the existing Bengal theatre that no less strove to be Indian.

Section 2 is subdivided into three segments. The first, "Theatre and Nation," traces the reciprocal relationship between theatre-as-nation and nation-as-theatre. The few plays written, but not immediately produced, between 1890 and 1908 enjoyed a variety of forms: verse-play, comedy, and farce. However, it is the writing and staging of *Sarodatsav* (1908) that truly inaugurated Tagore's twin

project of delineating India-as-nation and finding appropriate theatrical forms for it. His ideological formulation of nation passed through different phases of development – his vision of an indigenous society (*swadeshi samaj*), his growing aversion to the Eurocentric view of nation-state founded solely on power, his increasing distance from the *swadeshi* movement for its violent turns, and his utter shock at the spread of rabid nationalism from the West to the rest of the world. During this period, he reflected deeply on the making of a new nation, free from authoritarian and exclusionary politics, and focused on the inclusive development of a predominantly rural society that connects with the rest of the world in a spirit of love and cooperation. He wrote numerous essays and patriotic songs, organised cultural festivals and community events, and founded the “*asram-school*” at Santiniketan to infuse this spirit into his people. Tagore’s “parallel theatre” (48), in theory as well as in practice, embodies this mature worldview.

The second segment in Section 2, “Theatre at the *asram-school*,” shows how Tagore’s theatrical works drew more vigorously on indigenous performance traditions in an earnest effort to shake off the direct influences of the colonial stage. His “season” plays (musical celebrations of different seasons) had “innovative stage décor” and a “spontaneous style of acting” (64). His idea of *swadeshi samaj* now found its cultural form in dance and music which in turn entered into his theatrical performances, giving them a new semiology and aesthetic. Tagore imported dance forms from various places including Manipur, the southern states of India, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) as well. The third segment, “Theories of theatre,” discusses Tagore’s theatre essays. Sen refers to “Rangamancha” (1902) where the theatre-maker promotes the performance idiom of India’s *jatra* for its emphasis on intimate relationship with spectators, its suggestiveness, and poetic imagery. In the Prologue to *Phalguni* (1916), added later to the play text, he distinguishes between *chitrapat* (scenic painting) and *chittapat* (mindscape), arguing for the superiority of the non-realistic language of Indian theatre and performance over the mimetic and illusionist modes of representation in European theatre. Tagore’s use of text, motifs, images, body, and designs in plays such as *Phalguni* (1916) and *Tapati* (1929) made his theatre distinctive from the prevalent practice on the public stage and took it far ahead of his time. His theatre collapsed the binaries of verbal/visual, cerebral/sensuous, cognitive/perceptive, subjective/objective, speech/song, and lyrical/non-lyrical. Further, Tagore introduced dance in *Natir Puja* (1926) as a medium of theatrical expression that not only brought about in the 1930s the idea of “theatre as dance” (81) but finally led to a series of remarkable dance dramas like *Shapmochan* (1931), *Chandalika* (1938), and *Shyama* (1939). In “Rangamancha”, he also laid down the criteria for an alternative theatre venue for a select group of sensitive and perceptive audiences (*sabriday darshak*), envisioning it as a space for pure creativity.

“Rabindranath as theatre-practitioner” is the third and last section in the book (except for the conclusion). “Preparing the playtext”, the first subsection

here, discusses how themes in Tagore's plays come from a variety of sources including Indian epics, the Buddhist tales of Jataka, real events, dreams, and epiphanies. He revised his play texts from time to time to theatricalise his evolving social, ideological, and aesthetic concerns in consonance with changing social realities. "Selecting the cast," the second subsection, explains the process in which Tagore would select people to act in his plays. He always tried to take in the *asramites* because he considered them embodying the spirit and the ideology on which he sought to build his *swadeshi samaj* and possessing the training in the fine arts required for his creative ventures. Tagore also suffered scathing criticism from the prudish people around for the "erotic" contents of some of his plays (*Natir Puja*, an example), for making women sing and dance on the stage, whereas in actuality he tried to bring prestige and recognition to women's dance by making it an integral part of his work.

The next subsection under Section 3, "Rehearsing the play," discusses Tagore as producer/director. Sen here bases his account on the memoirs and recollections of the theatre-maker's contemporaries. Tagore sought to bring into acting elements of wit, humour, and some mannerisms to make the character appear lively. He put stress on "the technicalities of vocal [and physical] acting" (131). He was equally fastidious with stage-setting and costume, and was generally against the use of prompters. Tagore welcomed improvisations "even in between successive nights of the performance" (Rathindranath's words quoted on p.139) since he was never happy with the over-repetition of anything. "Setting the Stage," the next subsection, underscores the shift in Tagore's theatre from elaborate stage-designing to a setting in its bare essentials, sometimes symbolic in character. The "open-air ambience of Santiniketan" (153) provided him with the opportunity to use the space most creatively. "Acting the role" projects Tagore in his lead "parts" in many of his own productions, the acting style switching between the lyrical and the objective. "Theatricalizing cultures" discusses how the element of interculturality steadily entered into his later performances, especially into his dance dramas, as he went on emphasising the multiethnic/multilingual fabric of Indian society and envisioning the whole world as one community with cultural diversity. The last subsection, "Translating the playtext," first discusses Tagore's reservations about the power of translation in getting the essence out of the original and then his attempts at translating his own plays by taking "liberties" with the source text that resulted in what may be called transcreation. Subsequently, a number of his plays were translated, though not all by himself or to his satisfaction.

Apart from a fitting conclusion, the book has rare photographs and paintings of scenes from many of Tagore's performances, a brief chronology of events and works, and a comprehensive bibliography. One only wishes that some issues and facts were repeated a little less throughout the book. For instance, a long quotation from "Rangamancha" appears on pages 47, 77, and 150. The

appreciative lines about Tagore's role in *Aleekbabu* (1877) recur on pages 25, 163, and 295. Or the description of Tagore hurting his back by lifting a clay image of Goddess Kali in *Visarjan* finds mention on pages 130, 138, and 163. More important, several sections/subsections of the book repeat threads of Sen's analysis of Tagore's changing concept of nation and modes of theatre-making. Further, the copyediting could have been done with greater care to avoid slips, such as – “as early as in [year]” (pp. 26, 50, 63, 79, and 176); “the stage décor of productions were” (71). I nitpick these minor negatives simply because the volume is so neat on most other fronts – an outcome of a long, deep research that was not easy given the vastness of the subject and the difficulty of accessing required material.

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