

**Dance Education in Santiniketan**  
**(With special context to Kandyan & Kathakali Dance forms)**

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**Abstract**

*Dance was one of the best medium with which Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore spread his ideas. Emissaries were sent to different places within India such as in Kerala and abroad such as in Sri Lanka to gather dance knowledge. Eminent scholars were interacted and invited to Santiniketan to enrich the dance knowledge. It was also the cultural exchanges made with the places during Gurudev's visit and with the visitors of Santiniketan that marked the beginning of dance education in Santiniketan. The distinct Kathakali and Kandyan dance forms that we see today in dances and dance dramas of Santiniketan are outcome of such interactions. Therefore the study was performed to analyse the dance education in Santiniketan from the perspective of Kandyan and Kathakali dances which will enrich the knowledge and will open different scopes for further research.*

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindra Nritya, Sri Lanka, Kerala

**Introduction:**

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was against all kinds of narrow thoughts such as on nationality, religion, caste, colour and creed. When the world was in turmoil after the World War (1914-1918), Tagore dreamt of the need for global cooperation. So he wished to establish a new education having wider relationship of humanity based on new faith and idealism. On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1918, Tagore called a special meeting of students, teachers and well-wishers of the school at Santiniketan to explain the ideas of creating an institution for east-west fellowship and the study of cultures. Visva-Bharati was formally inaugurated on December 22, 1921. “*Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*” a Sanskrit meaning for “where the world meets in one nest” is the motto with which Tagore laid the foundation of Visva Bharati in Santiniketan. He toured extensively within and abroad India to spread his ideas and for the unity of the human race. He also sent emissaries to spread and collect ideas and knowledge to different regions within India and abroad (Das Gupta, 2010).

Tagore's message still exists today in the form of his art. Dance was one of the best medium with which he could spread his ideas. Emissaries were sent to different places within India such as in Kerala, Manipur, Cochin, Malabar etc and abroad such as in Sri Lanka, China, Java, Bali, Thailand, Burma and Japan to gather dance knowledge. Eminent scholars were interacted and invited to Santiniketan to enrich the dance knowledge. It was the cultural

exchanges made with the places during Gurudev's visit and with the visitors of Santiniketan that marked the beginning of dance education in Santiniketan. In 1951 Visva-Bharati was declared an institution of national importance and by an act of the Indian Parliament it has been declared a chartered university (Das Gupta, 2013). Today his own creation Rabindra Nritya stands firm in his holy ground of Santiniketan.

### **The beginning of dance education in Santiniketan:**

Tagore was exposed to western dance during his teenage in England which was exemplified from his two musical dramas and one opera in the 1880s inspired by the works of Spencer and Wagner (Banerjee, 2011). This interest for the terpsichorean muse persisted throughout his life. Tagore's dance interest had been well documented by Santidev Ghosh. Santidev described what he saw as the efflorescence of Tagore's dance interest over three decades in Santiniketan. The early dance movement between the periods of 1901 to 1920 in Santiniketan was explained in Santidev Ghosh's *Jeeboner Drubo Tara* (1996). He elaborated the absence of fixed dance movements during the period. The simple dance movements were depicted in the 1908 drama Sarat Utsava, directed by Dinendranath Tagore during Durga Puja vacation. In that drama two songs namely, "*Aaj dhaner khete roudra chaya*" and "*Megher koler rodh heseche badal geche tuti*" were performed with only simple movements depicted by simple rhythmic movement with the song. The drama was also repeated in 1911 and 1919 in Santiniketan. Simple dance movements were also seen in drama such as *Achalayatan*, *Dakghar*, *Falguni*, etc in Santiniketan. Gurudev's interest in dance was also visible in the play *Falguni* where he acted as an *andho bawul* (Ghosh, 1996).

After the establishment of Visva-Bharati, Tagore's interest in dance got momentum. Many musical dramas like *Natir Puja*, *Tasher Desh* etc were also composed and became popular and are well known till today. During the twilight years of his life the dance choreography reached its pinnacle and was visible in dance drama like *Chitrangada*, *Shyama*, *Chandalika* etc. In 1938 with lot of experimentations, the dance drama *Shyama* was created in a new style. The dance drama was arranged with a number of dance forms such as Manipuri, Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Kandyen dance forms. The performance and presentation was very attractive and appreciated by audience. Tagore's method in his dance was not focussed on a single dance form, instead according to the atmosphere, the background and the character, different form of dance was applied (Ghosh, 1996).

The present dance style of Santiniketan, popularly known as Rabindra Nritya thus is influenced by various classical dances and is not followed by any school of dance. Tagore encouraged the students to learn classical dance which he said was the basis for foundation however he would deviate from the strict orthodox grammar of the dance. He would wish to break the form creativity so that the dancer's expressions clearly represent the mood of the song. He said to the students, "Whenever you learn a style, learn it completely and don't leave anything out. But when you dance to my songs, don't put much ascent on *mudra* and eye gestures. Concentrate only on the natural expression of the eyes and that will be well".

His dictum stands that no dance would be adopted strictly according to its orthodox style but should be the *bhava* of the song and would be, first and foremost, clearly expressive (Banerjee, 2011). Rabindra Nritya has its own style of presentation and arrangement with Rabindranath Tagore stamp on it. Thus, the perfectness of Rabindra Nritya as we see today is the result of contribution of several artists, enrichment of several dance forms, which gurudev had wisely put it together over the years. Two of such forms include Kandyan Dance of Sri Lanka and Kathakali Dance of Kerala, India.

### **Kandyan dance and its arrival in Santiniketan**

The island of Sri Lanka separated from the Indian peninsula by a shallow strip of sea about 20 miles in width, falls within the precincts of Indian culture and presumably bears affinity with Indian culture. However, a closer detail will show the differences which is clearly depicted in the south Indian epic poem, *Cilappatikaram*, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. that mentions about Sinhala Natya.

The traditions of dance in Sri Lanka are four-fold and the tradition of Kandyan dance embraces all those four forms and thus is the most popular dance in the country (Muthukumarana, 2013). In Sinhala, this dance form is known as *Udarata Natum* which literally means dance of the upcountry. Kandyan Dance is a dance form that originated in the area called Kandy of the Central hills region in Sri Lanka and hence its name. The city of Kandy was the seat of government of the last king of Sri Lanka. It lays its origin in an exorcism ritual known as *Kohomba Kankariya* performed by Indian shamans who came to the island on the request of King Vijaya who was suffering from a recurring dream in which a leopard was directing its tongue towards the king which was believed to be as a black magic of his first wife, Kuweni. The ritual cured the illness and the dance was adopted by the natives. Kandyan dance flourished in the Kandyan Dynasty (1707-1815 A.D.). Originally it was performed by dancers who were identified as a separate caste under the Kandyan Fudal system. They were aligned to the Temple of the Tooth and had significant role to play in the *Dalada Perahera* (procession) held each year by the temple. Since its origin Kandyan Dance underwent many innovations under the Kandyan Dynasty. New dances such as *Vannam*, *Savdam*, *Talam*, *Prasasthi* were added to the repertoire (Dissanayake, 2012). The monarchy of the latter part of the dynasty belonged to the Nayakkar Dynasty, a dynasty of South Indian origin. The court of culture which was of Indian form and content provided the aesthetic needs to the dance thereby spreading its popularity beyond the royal household and enriched the dance forms of the territory. Thus the dance form at present is the outcome of such influence. However, after this period Sri Lanka came under the colonial rule of the British Empire. It had a disastrous effect on the arts and tradition of the country and was also true for Kandyan Dance.

Sri Lankan culture had been subjugated by colonial rule of the British for over 450 years. In independent Sri Lanka, Kandyan dancing has emerged as the foremost and most widely practiced dance form. It has blossomed into a highly esteemed and sophisticated art.

This is a result of cultural significance of this ritualistic performance and the role of several eminent personalities that raised the stature of the dance. Rabindranath Tagore discovered the beauty and elegance of Kandyan dance. He raised the stature of the dance style and inspired a renaissance of Sri Lankan culture. During the early part of 1920, Tagore had connections with many personalities of Sri Lanka including Buddhist priests, politicians and intellectuals. One of the main centres for interaction had been The University of Calcutta which had become a famous seat of learning and great scholars like Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee inaugurated the postgraduate studies too. Some of the eminent scholars include D.B. Jayatilaka, Dr W.A. De Silva, Ven Rambukawelle Siddhartha etc all of whom eventually were to become one of the leading figures in Sri Lanka. Tagore also visited Sri Lanka and his last visit was in 1934. It was in fact, his last overseas visit. It was the most remarkable visit and was on the invitation of Mr. Wilmot A Perera. During the visit *Shap Mochan* was presented by Santiniketan players led by Rabindranath Tagore in May, 1934 (Coperahewa, 2012). This rekindled in the minds of the Sri Lankans, an interest for oriental dance, music and art and their overall cultural heritage. It enthralled the conscience of the Sri Lankans especially intellectuals such as S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Sir Ivor Jennings and many others. Tagore showed his eagerness for the people of Ceylon to visit India and to share their culture. Tagore visited Galle on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1934 and witnessed the folk dance with masks at Matara. He also witnessed the famous Kandyan Dance on 3<sup>rd</sup> June performed by the troupe from Kegalle. Tagore was so fascinated that he mentioned of arranging a dancer and drummer to go back with him to Santiniketan. While speaking at the Panadura Town Hall the following evening, he made a reference to the beauty of the dance and thus instilled in his mind the beauty of the dance, on which he also wrote a famous poem (Sri Palee, 2010). Later Tagore also sent emissaries to Sri Lanka to learn the dance form. Kandyan dance was incorporated in several of his dance drama. One such instance is in *Shyama* where the Kotal character dances in Kandyan style.

### **Kathakali dance and its arrival in Santiniketan**

Kathakali is a highly accomplished dramatic art that originated in the later part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that this valuable form of dance was originated from:

1. The ancient ritual and cult plays of Hindu temples
2. The non-ritual but religious entertainments and dance drama forms prevalent in Kerala.

Kathakali is also called Attakatha (dance-play), and is fundamentally of epic dimensions. It has encountered a long journey from temples to courts and then to streets and to courtyards of Kerala that tells the story of its ever increasing universal appeal and popularity. Many ancient dances and dramas of Kerala have also influenced Kathakali. Kathakali roots are found in the temple art forms, such as Koodiyattam, Ashta Padiyattam, Krishnanattam, Therukoothu and visual art like Theyyam (Appukuttan *et al.*, 1993).

The Santiniketan dance is well enriched with Kathakali. However, Tagore had made certain limitations in incorporating the dance form. Kathakali *mudra*, eye gestures and rhythm were taken up to a certain limit. The foundation of “Visva Bharati” at Santiniketan by Tagore and “Kerala Kalamandalam” in Kerala by Mahakavi Vallathol had made the revival of performing arts incidentally almost simultaneous in South and in the East zone of India. Despite the lack of communication facilities developments of the art and sharing of ideas had been very wise (Kasturi Arachchi, 2013).

Rabindranath Tagore was attracted to Kathakali mainly as a result of its rhythmic dance components like *kalasam* and *sari*, with only a vaneer of gestural *abhinaya* (Banerjee, 2011). Kathakali’s theater aspects and the vigorous movements and detailed expressions attracted Tagore most and not its attire. He wanted to introduce them in his dance dramas. It was in 1931 when he sent Shantidev Ghosh to Kerala to find out the whereabouts of Kerala Kalamandalam that was opened just a few months ago. Shantidev learned Kathakali dance in Kerala Kalamandalam for about two months under gurus Kunju Kurup, Konnan Nair and Samikutty Bahgavatar. He learned *Kalasam*, *Shari*, *Mudra and Abhinaya*. On returning to Santiniketan in the month of August *Varsha Mangal* was performed applying Kathakali *Kalasam* on Tagore song of “*Ai buji kal baishaki*”. Later Kathakali was also incorporated in *Natir Puja* (Ghosh, 1996).

In 1932 Santidev again went to Kerala and stayed there for about a month which proved to be fruitful in learning more on Kathakali. Tagore’s interest in Kathakali grew stronger and he invited many votaries to Santiniketan. In 1935, Guru Gopinatha and Ragini Devi came to Santiniketan along with their troupe. They hold a colloquium and also staged many episodes based on *abhinaya* of Kathakali style. However several changes were made in the dance style, gestural vocabulary and traditional costumes to simplify the presentation. Guru Shankaran Namboodiri, the guru of Uday Shankar also came to Santiniketan and performed the solo form of Kathakali. He painstakingly performed the act of Putana Badh in *ekaharya abhinaya* where a single dancer enacting multiple roles – Putana, Krishna and Gokul women.

In 1939, Poet Vallathol reached Calcutta with his Kathakali troupe for performance in the Royal Asiatic Society. He also visited Santiniketan to meet Tagore where he also performed pure Kathakali dance and *abhinaya*. It was a two hours program called *Rukmagadha Charitam*. Overwhelmed with Kathakali dance technique Tagore requested Vallathol to send soon a Kathakali teacher to Santiniketan (Kasturi Arachchi, 2013). Once again Shantidev Ghosh went to Kalamandalam and returned with the first Kathakali teacher, Kelu Nair, in Santiniketan in 1937. There were no Kathakali accompanists during the time. So he composed Kathakali dance in Rabindra Nritya. It is interesting to note that only after Kathakali arrived in Santiniketan Gurudev wrote the dance drama *Shyama* in which the characters Bajrasen and Kotal were created with the Kathakali technique in mind. Kelu Nair was in Santiniketan till the death of Tagore in 1941. Later, Sri Haridasan Nair, Sri Balakrishnan Menon, Keshava Poduval, Unni Krishna Kuruppu and Mohan Krishnan Poduval were some of the eminent teachers at Santiniketan for Kathakali dance. The period

marked the beginning of modern Kathakali dance in Santiniketan with pure style of the dance (Kasturi Arachchi, 2013).

Kalamandalam Govindan Kutty also a renowned Kathakali dancer reached Kolkata in middle of 1955 to take up the post of Principal of Nritya Kairali, an institution run by the Calcutta Malayali Samajam. His arrival in the city had a great impact on the cultural history of the city and more or less on Santiniketan as well. He broadened the horizons of Kathakali in West Bengal with his assiduous efforts becoming Kathakali an integral part of the state. He often visited Santiniketan as an external examiner, and selection committee member of Visva-Bharati in Kathakali. His role as the main character in all the dance dramas of Rabindranth Tagore was very well acclaimed by the audience anywhere he performed (Banerjee, 2011). In 1984 as an experiment he choreographed and performed a solo dance recital in the name of *Rabindra Nrityanatyer Teeniti Nayak* enacting the roles of three main characters of Tagore's dance dramas - *Chitrangada*, *Shyama* and *Shapmochan*. The present appreciation of the Kathakali dance form in Rabindra Nritya therefore also owes its credit to him. As a result Kathakali dance is one of the most popular dance among the students and scholars of Sangit Bhavana, Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus it can be said that the dance education that we see today in Santiniketan is brought by the culmination of different dances especially Kandyen dance of Sri Lanka and Kathakali dance of Kerala, India. A wise incorporation of such dance by Rabindranath Tagore resulted in the much acclaimed Rabindra Nritya that we see today in Santiniketan. The study has also opened several scopes for further in depth study historically as well as analytically that will enrich the field of dance education.

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