

‘REALIZATION OF GOD IN MAN’ IN TAGORE’S GITANJALI

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, writer, philosopher was the ambassador of Indian culture to the rest of the world. He is probably the most prominent figure in the cultural world of Indian subcontinent and the first Asian person to be awarded with the Nobel Prize for ‘Gitanjali’. His achievement as a writer can only be viewed correctly in the context of his whole life since his philosophy and his poetics changed as he moved from one phase of his life to another. Tagore’s father influenced him in cultivating the spiritual life as well as in his everyday conduct. Much of Tagore’s ideology come from the teaching of the Upanishads and from his own beliefs that God can be found through personal purity and service to others. Through Tagore’s **Gitanjali** one can get a glimpse of the poet’s true nature and his spiritual feelings. Embodied in this work is his very soul, it will continue to give out sparks of truth to the world.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy, Poetics, Ideology

INTRODUCTION

The world rightly honors Rabindranath Tagore as one of the greatest literary figures in history. His writings include more than one thousand poems and two thousand songs in addition to a large number of short stories, novels, dramatic works and essays on diverse topics. As a writer of lyrics and songs he has rarely been equaled and perhaps never surpassed. As a short story writer, his rank is among the first three or four masters of the craft. As a novelist and a play Wright, he has achieved for himself an honored place in the world of letters. As a literary critic, he has been evidence of rare insight and deep sympathy with the work of men who differed from him widely in tradition and temperament. It is not thus surprising that his works should be translated into all the major languages of the world and brings joy, solace and strength to countless millions.

The beginning of Rabindranath Tagore’s career as a writer in English was sudden and without any particular creative compulsions. Till the publication of his first English work **Gitanjali** (Song offerings) published by the Indian society , London in 1912, Rabindranath Tagore though a celebrity in Bengal , was an obscure figure outside the Bengali speaking area in India , and totally unknown to the west. At that time he was fifty one years old and his place in the history of Bengali literature was firmly assured. It is interesting, therefore, to know why Tagore did feel obliged to write in English at all at that particular stage of his life. Unlike some of his predecessors, and contemporaries, Tagore did not have any ambition for fame as a writer in English. He had visited England twice, responded to European literature and music enthusiastically, he knew the anglicized elite of Calcutta quite intimately, but in his choice of language for his literary expression he had no dilemma.

The features of his poetry that won immediate and enthusiastic admiration are the perfection with which the poet's own ideas and those he has borrowed have been harmonized into a complete whole. Tagore stands out as a poet of rich endowment, characterized by his great profundity of thought, but most of all by his warmth of feeling and by the moving power of his figurative language.

In a letter to his niece Indira Devi, which is worth quoting, Tagore tells the story of the genesis of the translation of the **Gitanjali** poems. On his way over to England, he began translating for the first time his latest selections of poems of **Gitanjali** into English. Almost all his works before this was in Bengali. He made the translations in a little note book that he carried around with him and worked on during the long sea voyage from India. Rothenstein a famous English artist and Tagore's friend learned of the translation, and asked to see it. Reluctantly, Tagore let him have the note book. The painter was amazed. The poems were fantastic. He called his friend W.B. Yeats and asked him to have the note book. Tagore then presented some of his translated works and found an enthralled audience in Gandhi protégé Charles F. Andrews, Ezra Pound, Robert Bridges, Ernest Rhys, Thomas Struge Moore and others. Ezra Pound writes 'The appearance of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore is, to my mind, very important'.¹

Tagore's **Gitanjali** is a collection of religious poems, was one of his works that especially arrested the attention of the selecting critics. Since before the year of Noble prize the book in a real and full sense, has belonged to English Literature, For the author himself, whom by education and practice is a poet in his native Indian tongue, has bestowed upon the poems a new dress, alike perfect in form and personally original in inspiration. Tagore has been hailed from various quarters as a new and admirable master of that poetic art which has been a never-failing companion of British civilization ever since the days of Queen Elizabeth.

The tremendous enthusiasm with which **Gitanjali** was greeted by many distinguished poets and thinkers in England including W.B. Yeats, who wrote a brilliant introduction to it, promoted Rabindranath Tagore to translate more of his writings and wrote that this volume has "stirred my blood as nothing has for years . . ." He explains, "These lyrics . . . display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long." Then Yeats describes the Indian culture that he feels is responsible for producing this remarkable work:

The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble.²

On the other hand, his assessment of Tagore's achievement is accurate. As Yeats tells us, Tagore's songs are not only respected and admired by the scholarly class, but also they are sung in the fields by peasants. Tagore would never have expected his own poetry to be accepted by such a wide spectrum of the population.

In this book **Gitanjali** -- 'gitanjali' means 'offering of songs', it is an offering to God-- Rabindranath says, "I don't have anything else. I can only offer my deepest, heartfelt dreams, which I have brought into the poems." Hence he gave the name Gitanjali. These are the very few chosen poems which he has not destroyed. They are immensely beautiful. But he was not satisfied even with these poems, although he got a noble prize for this book.

In fact Tagore's influence was so extensive that it penetrated into all corners of life in India. The outpourings of his soul enriched his language. His books built up a magnificent treasure trove of literary gems, which became an abiding source of rapturous joy to the Bengal reader. The songs he composed in their hundreds delighted the hearts of his people. Nurtured on his intoxicating, elevating, heartwarming writings for over two generations, the Bengali found that he speaks in Tagore's own language, writes in his style, takes delight in his songs finds the best past time.

Though most of Tagore's works in translation have been in this medium rather than any other, in the original Bengali they have always been marked by metrical virtuosity. It is natural to think that the success of prose¹¹, **Gitanjali** had something to do with it. Yet his international reputation rests- and in all probability will rest in the foreseeable future entirely on **Gitanjali** in English and other works of his in English that followed it. Even in many parts of India, not to speak of the rest of the world, he is known mainly through these English translations. .

It has been said that Tagore's literature has a dynamic quality. It has a history. It has evolved through different phases of development to maturity. A continuous growth can be traced from his earliest writings to the poems written in his very last days. That is perhaps the reason why his poems retained their vigor and charm throughout the long period of his creative years, which spread more than half a century. To trace his very interesting history it is worthwhile noting that in the later stage of his life, Tagore himself became conscious of the dynamic quality of his writings. Thus in a reminiscing mood he observes:

The religion of man has been growing within my mind as a religious experience and not merely as a philosophical subject. In fact, a very large portion of my writings, beginning from the earliest production of my immature youth down to the present times, carries an almost continuous trace of the history of their growth³.

One can indicate the different phases through which his poetical thought passed to develop into maturity. It appears that three broad stages can be traced in the history of Tagore's poetry. In the first phase he came in close contact with nature. Nature in her different moods swayed his mind. In this entity, ruling nature and pervading her whole being, he discovered a pantheistic God. Ordinarily pantheism and the establishment of personal relationship with God are incompatible. Tagore's poetic heart however believed that it was compatible and the establishment of personal bond of love was possible. This yearning for union with God, the profound feeling of separation from Him, and the belief that at last God responded to his call, formed the complex theme that dominated Tagore's special poetical life for considerable period of time.

After passing deeper experiences, it appeared to him that realization of God on a personal plane was somewhat difficult to achieve. It is on a deeper realization that Rabindranath's concept of religion of Man is based. He thought that the nearest possible contact with it should be contact through Man, through whom it places itself with in his closest reach. So the proper realization for man should be service to mankind in general. Finally he realized. Love of Man thus replaces love of God.

I felt sure that some Being, who comprehended me and my world was seeking its best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality⁴.

Tagore's idea of the double role of the supreme principle as an impersonal force working in nature capable of assuming the garb of personality is very nicely brought out in a small poem from his pen. It gives an analogy collected directly from the book of nature".

Tagore realized that the supreme principle is too vast to reach. So the next best thing would be to serve and love it in a form most closely manifest to us human beings. This is what the poet calls the realization of the humanity of God.

Apparently there was enough justification for man to consider himself cruelly neglected. But history soon proved that by providing him with no special equipment, nature paved the way for man's greatness, so that he could dominate the world. In respect of man, however nature made a departure. It was desired that man should solve his own problems, so he was placed in an absolutely helpless condition, in wholly hostile surroundings, with only one weapon to help him. He was endowed with intelligence different to that of animals. To be able to think and to reason; and to serve his intelligence.

As a result under the stimulus of a hostile environment, his intelligence developed and with the aid of his hands, he was able to solve all the fundamental problems that threatened his existence. That is why Tagore says that by inflicting suffering on man nature has helped him to sharpen his intelligence and thereby showing him particular favor.

By rendering all his needs difficult to achieve, God has enhanced the prestige of man. For grazing animals there are the plains full of grass but man has to struggle hard for his food. Man was not born equipped with weapons of self confidence, but he had to make his own weapon by his own resources It is a compliment to man's power that with a soft skin and weak body, he has been able to establish his supremacy in the animal world. By inflicting sorrow on man, God has helped him to realize himself⁵

There is a justification for a detailed study of this story of man's struggle for existence and his ultimate victory, without following the track laid down for other animals. Having had to solve his problems of life by himself, man has developed certain distinctive qualities, which have made available to him opportunities for a higher life.

However, when man eventually won his battle for life, he was relieved of these uncongenial occupations. At last the environment was created for the development of his emotional faculties. This enabled him to develop the finer elements of his emotional faculties like love, affection, and fellow feeling within the family as well as in bigger groups.

That is how loved, the finest product of the emotional faculty was born. This is dedicated, self effacing love, which seeks fulfillment in selfless service. This is, according to the poet, brings within man's reach a new freedom of a higher quality. This prepares him for a deeper and wider relationship with the universe and thus forms the foundation of man's true religion.

And it is the urge for expressing respect and love for the supreme principle that continues the sense of religion in man. But religion should be practiced in such a manner that not only emotion but the other faculties like the unity of mankind also get scope for development. For ages man has been in quest of the discovery of this ideal form of religious practice. Led by their different tastes, beliefs and understanding of the problem, different thinkers have discovered different paths .The thinker who believes in a rationalistic approach and has a bias for the intellectual aspect of man has laid down comprehension through knowledge as the best form of worship.

It will not be a digression to mention here that the eminent scientist Einstein adopted a somewhat similar conception of religion, which may be taken as typical of great scientists. He observes:

Scientific research can reduce superstition, by encouraging people to think and view things in terms of cause and effect. Certain it is that a conviction akin to religious feeling, of the rationality, or intelligibility of the world, lies behind all scientific work of a higher order⁶.

Tagore rejects the image worship (Buddhism or Buddhist culture) also as unsatisfactory, because it is one sided. Undoubtedly it satisfies the emotions, but provides no field for the intellectual urge or the urge for an action. It also fails to develop man's entire humanity.

Ignoring humanity, those who, for the entire day,
Only plat at worshipping Thee,
Enjoying the intoxication of irrational
Emotion, these children in adult form,
Are today, themselves the playthings of
The whole world⁷.

This is the reason why Tagore could not approve of the tendency to over emphasis the ritual aspect of religious practices. It misplaces the emphasis from the substantive to the ancillary object. The devotee misses His God in the proliferations of the rituals. So he says:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple
With doors all shut? Open thy eyes and see thy God is not before thee!! He is there where the tiller is tilling the
hard ground and where
Path maker is breaking the stones. He is with them in sun and shower
And his garment is covered with dust⁸.

The man who has a preference for work and finds enjoyment in activity more than in intellectual pursuits would not accept such a path. He would think of a form of showing respect to the supreme principle which would provide him with plenty of scope for work. He would perhaps accept service to his country, to society as the best form of religious practice. Just as ritual becomes the preoccupation of devotee of this type, to the man who loves the work overmuch his work displaces God from his mind. This is the evil of exercising exclusively one single faculty. Such tragedy undertakes us where all our faculties do not get a chance for simultaneous and harmonious development. The lopsided development of one faculty stifles the growth of other faculties.

Tagore has drawn a very pathetic picture of a man brought to such extreme straits in one of his longer stories in poem. Here is an extract from it:

When works takes the place of God and displaces Him from

The platform of worship,

Round his temple, sky high stone walls are built on all sides⁹

The reasons which made him discard the path of knowledge, the path of devotion and the path of world also made him denounce asceticism as a form of religious practice. The different paths discussed above neglect only some of the faculties of man. Asceticism however, neglects all faculties. Asceticism for its own sake is to Tagore, an extreme form of self-deception. He does not say that sacrifice or self-control is to be altogether discarded.

As Tagore has observed, it makes no sense if a field is ploughed merely for the sake of ploughing, without any thought of subsequently raising a crop. It is his conviction based on the experience of a life time, that the supreme principle is manifest in this very world of perception, built up by the senses of form, touch, smell and color. Divinity is eager to shower its love with open hands through nature. If instead of establishing contact with it through the medium of our senses, we suppress them, we make a great mistake. So the poet says:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation,

I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight

In the concluding part of the same poem he develops the point further:

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of

Sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.

Yes all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy,

And all my desires ripen into fruits of love¹⁰

Even though he asserted that the supreme principle can (in the emotional plane) assume the limitation of personality and reciprocate love with his worshipper, he felt that its material form is too imponderable to make intimate physical contact possible. The more he gave thought to, the more his conviction grew that this principle can nowhere be located in nature. Its manifestation through the perpetual world is too subtle to make it possible for ourselves to reach it or for our hands to establish contact with it in a physically tangible form. So he concluded that:

We miss the principle that is manifest as a pervasive force everywhere in the universe, if we try to catch it in a particular point of space¹¹.

So in this view the best form of religious practice is service to God as revealed in humanity at large. When this realization came to Tagore, he discarded the traditional form of worship previously adopted by him and felt a strong urge for disinterested service to man as the only rational form of worship acceptable to him. Thus he says: Such a conception of religion discards silent meditation, ritual worship in the temple or contact through inferential knowledge, removed from the tumult of the multitude. It seeks contact with the Divinity by union through love with mankind.

This theme is the inspiration of the following poem:

Where thou art in union with the multitude

I shall seek union with Thee.

Neither in the forest, nor in the solitude
 Nor inside my own mind,
 But where Thou art the beloved of every body
 Thou art my beloved too ¹²

In such a union all the powers at our disposal should be discarded to the cause of the welfare of mankind. The entire human race should be the object of our love as the most intimate manifestation of the Divinity. This is what the poet describes as a process of the 'killing of selfish desire by making it spread'. Service in the welfare of mankind will thus become the best mode of worship. Service to universal man is in Tagore's opinion the best service to God. Adopting such a role a man according to him becomes a *Viswakarma*, the world worker.

A worshipper inspired by such a conception of religion would say that there is no sense in looking for union with God in temples and churches. For him the ritualistic form of worship has no attraction. He hears the call for service in the field of humanity at large. So the poet urges:

Come out of thy meditation and leave aside thy flowers and incense
 What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?
 Meet him and stand by him, in toil and sweat of thy brow ¹³.

Thus the object of service here is stricken humanity in particular. Selfless service to mankind in general is no doubt good work for the 'world worker', but service to suffering humanity, to the down trodden and the neglected is service that is far better.

CONCLUSIONS

There is only a very thin line that separates poetry from spirituality or religion. In fact poetic experience is akin to spiritual/religious experience when the poet is genuine in his pursuit. In spirituality great thoughts realized by enlightened beings gradually transformed themselves into religious doctrines and the spiritualist came to be regarded as God incarnate. A true spiritualist never abandons the world but moves along with the world understanding the problems of humanity, and redressing them.

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