

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S TRYST WITH THE DIVINE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF
GITANJALI

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* which is a string of song song by somebody who must have experienced ecstasy—a state of divine union of soul with the Supreme, is not only the pride of India, for it resonates the ancient Indian mysticism but also gives solace to the whole humanity, for it echoes in its cadence the essence of every religion. Tagore, rising high above mere propagandist philosophizing about religious tenets and ritualism, feels the presence of the divine in every object of his creation and is inextricably tangled in it. His tryst with the divine will not take place in some transcendental world on some other plane; his is the tryst with God...takes place on this very earth and his songs of *Gitanjali* give expression to his ecstatic pleasure that he has already experienced. In the present paper, I endeavour to make a probe into the poet's perception of the divine, though I strongly believe that *Gitanjali* is the song of soul, the harmony of life that has achieved fulfilment. It can only be experienced as a whole not by dissection.

Keywords: mysticism, renunciation, ritualism, salvation, spiritual realism, humanistic spiritualism.

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In the tumultuous socio-political era of the pre-war world, when the West had become a Godless state (with Nietzsche's proclamation of "Death of God"), Rabindranath Tagore offered solace through his spiritually charged artistic achievement of immense appeal and supreme significance, *Gitanjali* (1912). *Gitanjali*, a collection of song offerings by Tagore, is an excellent expression of Indian Bhakti cult—with no overt didacticism but with ultimate submission before the will of God. There is human longing in Tagore to be united with God, to seek fulfilment in the unification of the human soul with the cosmic soul, the union of self with the supreme when he says:

And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love. (*Gitanjali* XXXVI)

Tagore's conception of *Gitanjali* took place through his unquestioning devotion to God to whom he offers his gratefulness in the opening poem where he affirms his firm faith in the immortality of soul and ever-refreshing life:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again and fillest it ever with fresh life. (*Gitanjali* 1)

The poetic collection *Gitanjali* is just like a string of holy beads that chants the name of the Divine One with such rhythm and cadence that it seems to be a single whole without any joint. About *Gitanjali*, M. K. Naik writes in his *A History of English Literature*:

The central theme of *Gitanjali*, Tagore's finest achievement in English verse, is devotion and its motto is, 'I am here to sing thee songs.' (Poem no. XV). These songs, firmly rooted in ancient Indian tradition of Indian saint poetry, yet reveal a highly personal quest for the divine, characterized by a great variety of moods and approaches. (63)

Tagore feels ecstatic experience of the divine and gives expression to this blissful state in his utterances in the form of songs:

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterances ineffable. (*Gitanjali* I)

Tagore establishes an intimate relationship with God. But his God is not a sectarian one belonging to any particular religion or culture. Tagore's very birth and upbringing were significant factors in promoting his spiritual progress and turned him into a cosmopolitan. Tagore himself says:

I was born in what was once the metropolis of British India. My own ancestors came floating upon the earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of The East India Company. The unconventional code for our family has been a confluence of three cultures, the Hindu, Mohammedan and British. (105)

But Tagore's vast experience of different sects and faiths does not lead him to any conflict, for he is at heart a mystic who believes in God, the Almighty as being one and Supreme and craves to be one with him. Mysticism, as defined in the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* is a "belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the Absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender." In *Gitanjali* Tagore combines diverse religious traditions of Sufi mysticism, Vashnavite ideals, Bengali Baul lyrics and Upnishads with the best of literature and philosophy both from the East and the West. Through his auto-translations, he achieves a kind of creative synthesis in *Gitanjali*. K. R. S. Iyengar writes: "The *Gitanjali* songs are mainly poems of bhakti in the great Indian tradition. We have Vaishnava poets and Saiva poets who seek God as a child seeks its mother, as a lover seeks his (or her) beloved" (*Indian Writing in English* 110).

The influence of the Hindu Advaita (non-dualism) can be traced in his song "Leave This Chanting" where he feels complete identification with God; where God is not a distant, separate entity but bound with his own self in creation:

"Deliverance! Where is deliverance to be found! Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bounds of creation; he is bound with us all forever. (XI)

In his song 36, Tagore in his submission to God, makes a confession of his spiritual inadequacy and prays to Him to grant him a balanced state where joys and sorrows mean the same to him. He wants to surrender before God, but never before "insolent might". It is his wish to be morally and spiritually strong and have noble heart that craves to serve his fellow men with love and sympathy:

Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service. (XXXVI)

Following the Hindu tradition of *Guru-Shishya* Tagore pleads to God to strict with him and be reproachful to rectify his spiritual deprivation. He acknowledges God's authority who is the king:

When my beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door, my king, and come with the ceremony of a king. (XXXIX)

Here, Tagore connects Christian mysticism with that of Ancient India when he condemns his selfish self, a slave to desire, and supplicates before God to use his weapons of light and thunder to destroy his inadequacies. An amalgamation of Indian and western philosophy can also be seen in Tagore's treatment of nature also. For him, as suggested by Vedantic terminology, Prakriti and Purusha are the two aspects of the Absolute. As for Wordsworth, Tagore too, nature is his pantheistic God which is ever-benevolent on human beings whom Tagore compares with children in the lap of Mother Nature. In poem LX, Tagore shows his belief in the essential unity of man and nature which is never hostile to man in Tagore's poetry. The sea-waves roar threateningly and forecast tempests yet their impact on the children playing on the sea-shore is that of a mother's lullaby. Nature causes no harm to the innocent children who are there to play in her lap and not for the material wealth that adults come to seek.

Tagore prays to God to remove his weaknesses so that he may substantiate his vision of a peaceful world. His prayer is not for his own uplift and spiritual enlightenment but for his fellowmen, too, who lack spiritual courage and who cannot hold their heads high. He prays to the heavenly Father to lead his country into the "heaven of freedom" not in political terms but spiritual and humanitarian sense also.

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. (XXXV)

"He (Tagore) was in line with the *rishis*, the great sages of India, drawing from the wisdom of the ancient past and giving it a practical garb and meaning in the present," says Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. (*Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume* xvi). Thus, Tagore is a mystic, but he differs from the stereotypes in the sense that his mysticism never allows renunciation of life. Tagore vehemently denounces idol worship and mere ritualistic religious practices. Unlike other devotional poets he never seeks salvation in sedentary isolation, in the negation of the worldly affairs or in mere meditation. Tagore does not seek deliverance in breaking ties with worldly life, for he feels joy in his connectivity with His creation.

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight. (LXXIII)

Tagore himself confesses that he has no desire for immediate emancipation from this beautiful world. He has greater interest in living among and along with his fellow men in this world. Tagore talks of seeking fulfilment in Karma and not in evading it. He embraces life in all its simplicity, its complexity, its baseness, its nobility and crudeness. His God is with the ordinary man whose clothes are tattered and soiled but who goes on doing his duty nonchalantly:

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even come down only dusty soil! (11)

Though Rabindranath Tagore is one of the Indian pioneers writing in English who had in *Gitanjali* an opportunity to present the Indian mysticism to the West, he does not confine himself to the stereotype of a spiritual Guru. His stance, instead of ruminating about vague philosophies of self and the Other, takes into account the whole humanity; his ultimate preoccupation is with humanism. Humanism, as defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, is "an outlook or system of thought concerned with human rather than divine or supernatural matters; a belief or outlook emphasizing common human needs and seeking solely rational ways of solving human problems and concerned with mankind as responsible and progressive intellectual being." This is simply the sense that the term has come to acquire in the West where humanism is a kind of ideology that came in being as a reaction to the prevailing religious dominance. Tagore's humanism, on the other hand, does not seek to dissociate itself from God. It does not place the interests of the sovereign individual at the centre—as does the Western concept of secular humanism that has come to acquire universal validity. In fact, Tagore's humanism is not one thing but many. Despite his religious inclination and his firm faith in divinity, he was quite pragmatic in his outlook. Even in a period of religious revivalism, he kept himself away from any institutionalized religious affiliations. In spite of his deep rootedness in the Upanishads which expound man and the concept of self in an abstract manner, he simply concerns himself with a humanistic approach with a sustained emotional power. His commitment to social justice for humans and his abhorrence of violence as man's ultimate salvation find expression not in propagandist tones but in an artistic way. He is, above all, a poet and an artist and his religion is that of an artist who is not concerned about sin and redemption, good or evil, but about the soul's fulfillment that he gets after an illuminating experience. In his lecture on "The Religion of Man" Tagore himself proclaimed:

I have already made the confession that my religion is a poet's religion. All that I feel about it is from vision and not from knowledge. Frankly, I acknowledge that I cannot satisfactorily answer any question about evil, or what happens after death. Nevertheless, I am sure that there have come moments in my own experience when my soul has touched the Infinite and has become intensely conscious of It through the illumination of joy. (105-6)

What he believed in may better be termed as his spiritual humanism. And in his pursuit of spiritual humanism, Tagore puts all emphasis on man. To him, God is simply the Supreme Man, God humanized. It is perhaps this simplicity of the elementary humanity of Tagore that appeals more than any complex spirituality

of the orthodox mystics. In his song 15, he even brings divinity to earthly levels. He equates divine awe with day-to-day life and calls attention to the need for deep empathy with ordinary people living ordinary lives. Here Tagore resembles Walt Whitman in his attitude towards God. Though Tagore's God is immanent and omnipresent, He is not a remote and inaccessible Absolute but an embodiment of love. Moreover, Tagore sees God in Man as Whitman does. Their humanism, at the same time, derives force from faith in God. Tagore was well-acquainted with the works of Whitman, which bear an unmistakable stamp of Hindu philosophy and mysticism. Tagore paid a glowing tribute to Whitman in these words, "Whitman is America's greatest poet. Through his work I know more of America and I catch its heart-beat. He is the great voice of the American nation—the greatest it ever had" (David 44).

Just as Tagore identifies man (the tiller, stone-breaker and labourer) with God, Whitman sees God in man and so identifies himself with God. In "Song of Myself" section 48 Whitman says:

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the face of men and women I see God, in my own face in the glass. (*Leaves of Grass* 74)

Tagore recognizes the dignity of Karma and equates the work of a labourer with the creation of God, who, too, is an all-time worker. Tagore elevates the worker to the level of God and as an embodiment of God, thereby asserting his belief in humanism. This strain of humanism promotes Whitman's concept of mysticism also, and is an integral part of it. His poems repeatedly refer to such terms as God, soul and self, the terms which are the stock-in-trade of mystics, nevertheless, man occupies the central stage in Whitman's scheme of the Divine and he avers that there is nothing in the universe more divine than man.

There is much similarity between Tagore's brand of mysticism and that of Whitman. Tagore sets little store by the ceremonial worship of, and prayer to, the Deity. He asks man to 'leave this chanting'. Whitman also is not a praying man. He says:

What is man anyhow? What am I? What are you?
I wear my hat as I please indoors and out.
Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and be ceremonious? ("Song of Myself" Section 20)

In fact, Tagore nowhere shows the traces of asceticism, rather, it is his spiritual realism and humanized spiritualism wherein lies the salvation of modern man which can be achieved not only through the union of soul with the supreme soul but also of soul with soul.

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