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HUMANISM OF RABINDRA NATH TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

Tagore's humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of inter-personal (I and thou) relationship. I shall discuss here Tagore's humanism vis-à-vis inter-personal relationship. In order to expound this idea, I shall embark on his concept of man; man the finite and man the infinite, man within bounds and man the boundless. Tagore has reflected comprehensively and intensely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation (a) to nature and (b) to modes of inter-personal relationship. I have also discussed the role of language in understanding inter-personal relationship, and finally arrive at the conclusion that the inter-personal relationship of I and thou takes the form of intra-personal relationship of I am thou.

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INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Bengali Literature, and he was the one writer who gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. The award of Nobel Prize for literature to him was but the beginning of a drama of recognition on a global scale to which there cannot be many parallels in literary history. Tagore has reflected widely and extremely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation-

- to nature and
- to modes of inter-personal relationship.

Tagore has always considered himself to be a poet and neither a scholar nor a philosopher. Tagore¹ acknowledges that his religion is a poet's religion. In the *Times Literary Supplement* the following is written: "Perhaps no living poet was more religious and no man of religion was more poetical than this great Indian."¹

¹ Quoted from S. Radhakrishnan, "Most Dear to All the Muses," in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume (1861-1961)* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010), xviii-xix.

Tagore has a vision of the world including with the mysteries of man, of nature and of the vast universe have unfolded themselves before his vision and the truth he has realized from the bottom of this comprehension. And this provides us the ground to claim Tagore a philosopher.

Radhakrishnan rightly said that,

“In interpreting the philosophy and message of Sir Rabindranath Tagore, we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion, and art, of which his work is the outcome and expression.”²

Tagore’s way of thinking is similar to some of the views of western philosophers like Hegel and Sartre Kant. The humanism of Tagore has been discussed by me in this paper. This is largely expressed through the concept of inter-personal relationship. In order to expound his idea of humanism corresponding to inter-personal relationship, I shall delve more on his concept of man. His views about man/personality can be found in various writings, particularly in *Sāadhanā* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922) and *The Religion of Man* (1930). Tagore has reflected comprehensively and intensely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation

- to nature and
- to modes of inter-personal relationships.

The Relationship of Nature with man

Tagore envisages that the perfection of man is attained through the enlargement of personality. Man is the architect of his own destiny. His perfection leads him to have a link with infinity. The perfection attained by the man should be applicable to the entire society but not to the individual alone.

Tagore’s concept of man/human personality is finding its fruition through the realization of the feeling of intimacy with nature. From his childhood days, he is fascinated by the splendor of nature—the rising of the sun, the chirping of the birds and the whistling of the wind through the trees. He is of the opinion that nature does not lose herself but reveals its true colour to a person’s self, having its own eternal bindings with human nature. Nature is not alien but is essentially related to man. In the vastness of nature, we are not unknown strangers; we are her kith and kin. He also compares the beautiful nature with our mother.

Tagore writes:

When in the morning I looked upon the light I felt in a moment that I was no stranger in this world, that the inscrutable without name and form had taken me in its arms in the form of my own mother.³

S.C. Sengupta in his article,

“The Surplus in Man: The Poet’s Philosophy of Man,”⁴

Argues that the inter-relation between man and nature can be found at the lower or the communication stage and the higher or the communion stage. They are not two different stages. Rather, one stage is ultimately passing over to the growth of another stage. Man has a very good communication with nature.

Nature helps man to develop his personality in as much as man helps nature to reveal its beauty.

Man grows along with nature in so far as he can identify himself with nature and makes it his messenger of communication. With the help of nature man creates his own nature, creates beauty, and creates art. In his creativity and self-expression, man becomes conscious of the abundance, his ability to go beyond his physical finitude and through creation of art, strives to send his communication to the Supreme Person who reveals Himself to him.

Again, Communication as a form of inter-relation between man and nature has two levels—one is the cognitive and the other is the existential. At the cognitive level, nature contributes to knowledge not as an externality but as revealed to man. Tagore writes,

² S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan and Co.,1919), preface vii

³ .S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan and Co.,1919), preface vii.2.

⁴ S.C. Sengupta, “The Surplus in Man: The Poet’s Philosophy of Man,” in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, ed. by Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K.G. Subramanyan (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), 39-54.

“All our knowledge of things is knowing them in their relation to the Universe, in that relation which is truth.”⁵

But man due to his engagements with the day today activities, forgets that nature is his. It is not because that the nature has grown out of touch with us, rather, we do not perceive nature in its aspect of unity; we are driven to destruction by our focus on the fragmentary. He laments that,

“we grow out of touch with this great truth, we forget to accept its invitation and its hospitality, when in quest of external success our works become unspiritual and unexpressive.”⁶

Tagore also quotes here Wordsworth’s line:

The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Little we see in Nature that is ours.⁷

There is always a correlation between the extent of receiving from the nature and separating from the ego. There is now a deepening of self-knowledge, and self-development at the higher level of relatedness to nature is communion or unity. Tagore thinks that the unity of man and nature has its source in the One or the Absolute. The spirit and nature are the twin aspects of the Absolute.

It is in man’s consciousness of a deeper unity with nature, with the universe, and finally with the Supreme Person who has created this universe for man. Communion as a higher mode of relationship between man and nature is characterized by inwardness and depth. The depth has an educating purpose. Nature teaches man in as much as we teach others. The communion as a matter under discussion is the experience of joy, freedom and love. Tagore comments:

When a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him. When he meets the eternal spirit in all objects, then is he emancipated for then he discovers the fullest significance of the world into which he is born; then he finds himself in perfect truth, and his harmony with the all is established.⁸

It was the opinion of Tagore that nature forms the background for the development of human personality. There is a deep relationship of Man and nature. It is not a relation of *anti-thesis* between man and nature—*man against nature*, but a relation of *man with nature*. Both man and nature have equal importance for Tagore. But man is not satisfied with what he is. He has a desire to transcend his own limitation and finitude and ultimately wants to reach a point where one is identical with oneself. Nature always helps man to realize this goal. Man carries within himself the beauty of nature and an urge to transcend one’s facticity and reaches the Infinite. Tagore says that man is a bridge between two Poles. He remarks:

At one pole of my being I am one with stock and stones. There I have to acknowledge the rule of universal law. That is where the foundation of my existence lies, deep down below....But at the other pole of my being I am separate from all. There I have broken through the cordon of equality and stand alone as an individual. I am absolutely unique, I am I, I am incomparable.⁹

But Tagore asserts that realizing the Absolute/Infinite requires more toil and suffering. Tagore says in *Gītānjali*:

Obstinate are the trammels, but my heart aches
when I try to break them.
Freedom is all I want, but
to hope for it I feel ashamed.
I am certain that priceless wealth is in thee,
and that thou art my best friend, but I have not
the heart to sweep away the tinsel that fills my room.

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 2, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), 496.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhanā*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2, 283

⁹ Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 306.

The shroud that covers me is
 a shroud of dust and death;
 I hate it, yet hug it in love.¹⁰

Tagore concept of the consciousness of consciousness has affinity with the consciousness of Immanuel Kant. Kant says that all representations have relations to pragmatic consciousness and all pragmatic consciousness has a necessary relation with transcendental consciousness. It is necessary in our knowledge situation that all pragmatic consciousness belong to one transcendental consciousness, that is, the consciousness of 'I' or me. Kant argues,

"...all empirical consciousness has a necessary consciousness of myself as original apperception. It is therefore absolutely necessary that in my knowledge all consciousness should belong to a single consciousness, that of myself."¹¹

This bidding and unchanging 'I' (pure apperception) is the basis of all our representations. This pure apperception is the highest principle in the whole sphere of human knowledge. This consciousness of 'I' or the thinking 'I' expresses the act of determining my existence. I am conscious of my own existence. This consciousness of my existence is given by self-intuition.

According to Tagore, man's personality and creativity go together. Man comes out of his boundary of physical necessities and moves forward to realize the Infinite run on two parallel lines—that of utility and of self-expression. True freedom is the transcendence of mere being through creative becoming. This reminds us of the opinion of Sartre, when he says:

Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus selfsurpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his selfsurpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity.¹²

The personal man is the highest in man the Eternal man, the Complete Man in this realization of the unity of beauty, truth and goodness according to the view of Tagore. There is an inter-relation between the world and the personality of man. In fact, this world is not perfect for the development of the personality of man. with our love and hatred, pleasure and pain, fear and wonder this world becomes a part of our personality.

Inter-personal Relationship

In this section, I have discussed the Inter-personal Relationship of the *I* and *Thou* relationship in Tagore's humanistic thoughts. The assertion of the primordial relationship is the essence of Tagore's humanism; and he calls his humanism the *Religion of Man*. But the term, 'Religion', does not suggest that man is under the control of an infinite spiritual being like God. The function of religion is to bring the individual into concord in reason, in love, indeed with the Supreme Man, the Universal being. The reality of the Supreme Person is as much dependent upon the personal being as the latter is dependent upon the former. So God is also a personal being like man.

Tagore believed that the state of realize our relationship with *all* through the union with the divine is the ultimate end and fulfillment of humanity. Therefore, the spirit of One in God has the many for the realization of the unity and the truth behind this spiritual union is *love*. He thinks that man is above all a lover, his freedom and fulfillment is in love, which is another name for perfect comprehension. By this power of comprehension, this permeation of his being, he is united with the all-pervading spirit. Through love, human society is for the best expression of man, and that expression, according to its perfection, leads him to the full realization of the divine in humanity.

¹⁰ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 28.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by N.K. Smith (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), 142.

¹² Jean- Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet, (London:Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1948), 55.

The moral development lies in man's growth to his unselfish and true self through good and desirable acts. In his moral life, man has the sense of obligation and his freedom at the same time. Morality relates to conduct which essentially is a function of our will. Morality cannot be reduced to mere good conduct. It is a way of attaining to what *one ought to be* through right or good doing. Morality consists in being good through good action. Such action is possible through discrimination between the desired and the desirable. Selfishness or egoism is normally desired, but it is not desirable because it hinders the proper development of social relationship and the growth of the true self of man.

Tagore equates love with truth and truth with beauty. He says that it is only when one can detach from the narrow boundaries of selfishness, can one have a true vision of the beauty, which is omnipresent and realise its everlasting relation with truth. This is the ultimate object of our existence, that we must ever know that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty;' we must realise the whole world in love, for love gives its birth, sustains it, and takes it back to the bosom.

Tagore thinks that there is no other concept of truth, except human truth. The entire universe is linked up with us, and it indicates that the truth of the universe is the human truth. Tagore believes that truth and beauty are also dependent upon man.

Beauty is in the ideal of perfect harmony which is in the Universal Being; Truth the perfect comprehension of the Universal Mind. We individuals approach it through our accumulated experience, through our illumined consciousness. It is pertinent to discuss here the conversations of Tagore and Tagore believes in the *Gītā's* concept of freedom; true freedom is not the freedom *from* action but freedom *in* action. He says that there may be two types of freedom — outer and inner, where outer freedom is the freedom from the guidance of pleasure and pain, and inner freedom is from the narrowness of self desire. We have our own freedom of will, which can only find its true meaning in relation to the freedom of other wills. The more our will is freed and widened, the stronger our relationship with the universal world of reason. This is the bond of union through which man is related to the world and he feels an exceeding joy through this communion.

There is a popular belief that Tagore's idea may be roughly coined as spiritualistic. At least, by going through some of his writings, one may have such a perception. But this will not be a complete interpretation about him. While Tagore's thoughts can be considered spiritual but it is not a mysticism of irrationality. Spiritualism of Tagore is not equivalent to Godliness. His God manifests himself in the divinity of man.

Conclusion

Tagore have a prophetic vision .Tagore's view of language is ontological, because, human ontology determines the nature and function of language. Man expresses himself through his creativity, and language is one of the important modes of communication of man's self-revealing activity. Man is an expressive being, and therefore, he is capable of achieving self clarity and freedom. Freedom is integral to a self-realizing subject. According to Tagore, self-expression is the important channel of communication. As an expressive being, man recovers communion with the universe. It is in man's consciousness of a deeper unity with nature, with the world, of which we are a part. The self-revealing being (I) is in interchange with the greater nature.

The self-expressive being carries an eternal relation with the other and the other is also dependent upon my existence. There arises an interpersonal relationship between 'myself' and the 'other' (*I* and *thou*). It will be appropriate to fit here the views of Hegel that the Idea becomes its other, and then returns into self-consciousness in *Geist*.

The life of the absolute subject is essentially a process, a movement, in which it posits its own conditions of existence to the universe, and then overcomes the opposition of these conditions to realize its goal of self-knowledge. But at the deeper ontological level, this inter-personal relation of *I* and *thou* takes the form of intra-personal level of human existence (*I am thou*). I am dependent upon other and the other is a condition for my union with the allpervading spirit. Tagore thinks that to attain our world-consciousness, we have to bring together our feelings with this all-pervasive infinite feeling, and this is possible when we free ourselves from the bonds of personal desires, prepare ourselves for our social obligations and sharing the burdens of our fellow beings. So *I* and *thou* work for a common cause to achieve the unity of consciousness. He says that to be

truly united in knowledge, love and service with all beings, and thus to realize one's self in the all-pervading God is the essence of goodness, and it is also the key that opens the gate of the spiritual life.

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