

UNVEILING RELIGION IN TAGORE'S GITANJALI

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Abstract

'Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark'

Gitanjali

In this paper, I have tried to project the views of Rabindranath Tagore on religion. He is the first Indian poet to have received the Nobel Prize for English Literature in 1913. His verses not only praise the Almighty but also explain His ways to common people, weaving the fabric of spirituality (perfect detachment) and life full of wisdom: that is KARMA. As Buddhism states: things we choose to do or say or think set karma into motion. The law of Karma is therefore law of cause and effect. Rabindranath was greatly influenced by own father Debendranath's spiritual disposition. He was involved in the activities of Brahmosamaj inspired by the great revolutionary social reformer- Raja Rammohan Roy. In 1910, Tagore wrote an essay titled 'My Religion', which clearly shows influence of Brahmosamaj, the Baul singers, and a plethora of local saints, enjoying the traditional street singing with them. He makes it abundantly clear that religion is not merely an indoctrination of taboos and blind faith in rituals but it is liberation of a higher form. This paper tries to suggest that Tagore was fine blend of a Humanist, religious and a highly imaginative poet. He made Indians proud by bringing in the Nobel for Poetry. His work Gitanjali –literally song offerings- is a religious offering of his immensely overflowing praise of God.

Key words: Religion, spirituality, Karma, indoctrination, liberation, Humanist, song offerings

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INTRODUCTION:

The poet- singer:

Tagore is a versatile poet. He received the Nobel for his intense and passionate poetic style. His imagery is in alignment mainly with his religious thoughts. He appeals to HIM (God) to help him in REUNITING with Him in a very lofty and ecstatic manner. Though not easy as it appears, yet the poet continually tries to get rid of his SELF, lift his ego- his dress- so to say, which is a hindrance. He simply means that our exterior is full of faults. Our minds are full of doubts. We must freely allow Him to take us in his lap. We must forget ourselves in His presence. Our souls must act according to HIS will. Tagore says-

'Man possesses an extra awareness that is greater than his material sense-this is his manhood. It is this deep-abiding creative force which is his religion. So that in my language the word "religion" has a profound meaning. The "wateriness" of water is essentially its religion, in the spark of the flame lies the religion of fire. Likewise, Man's religion is his innermost truth.'

In man-in every human being-truth abides in its universal form, and alongside it has also its individual aspect. Herein lays one's own special religion. It is here that man recognizes the variedness of the universe. From the standpoint of creation this variedness is a valuable thing. That is why we are not endowed with a power that can totally destroy it.

THOU hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through

it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable¹.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

Religion has been a part of man's universe in many manifestations, under many nomenclatures. Each one has its own way, method and language to connect with a 'Universal form'. Through his inner heart man is related to supreme, which gives him special delight, unique in itself. It removes all the fanciness and superficiality and brings out the true religion. For Tagore, God was only one – Brahma of the Upanishads. He sincerely wrote against the orthodox Hinduism, its multiple gods and maintaining rites and rituals. Far beyond the ordinary, his religion exists. Tagore said that one should practice what he preached. Otherwise, the whole life man tries to find answers but cannot find. Thus, he gives us the idea of one's own religion. The other side of the religion being how people know a man. 'By his words and by his action.' His action should be in accordance with the 'inner voice'. A man should participate and extend his sphere of action in and around himself. He should serve the society selflessly.

In the years before writing 'My Religion,' Tagore had given it form in his poetry, as in this poem, translated by Tagore himself, from *Naivedya*, "Offering" (1901):

Far as I gaze at the depth of Thy immensity

I find no trace there of sorrow or death or separation.

Death assumes its aspect of terror

and sorrow its pain

only when, away from Thee,

I turn my face toward my own dark self.

Thou All Perfect,

everything abides at Thy feet
for all time.

The fear of loss only clings to me
with its ceaseless grief,
but the shame of my penury
and my life's burden
vanish in a moment
when I feel Thy presence
in the centre of my being.

The poet admittedly accepts 'Thy presence', where no traces of sorrow or pain could be felt.

Tagore's family recited the texts of the Upanishads as part of their daily worship and that 'Western readers will have the opportunity of coming into touch with the ancient spirit of India.' He states all the great religious traditions 'have to be judged not by the letter but by the spirit' and is of 'living importance,' not dead artefacts in a museum. In the ancient forest hermitages, India had evolved 'the early ideal of strenuous self-realisation,' putting all her emphasis on 'the harmony that exists between the individual and the universe.' Signifying the text of our everyday meditation that is the Gayatri, a verse which is considered to be the epitome of all the Vedas. By its help we try to realize the essential unity of the world with the conscious soul of man; we learn to perceive the unity held together by the one Eternal Spirit, whose power creates the earth, the sky, and the stars, and at the same time irradiates our minds with the light of a consciousness that moves and exists in unbroken continuity with the outer world.' He said.

Tagore's UNIVERSALITY

Tagore was an ideal Indian. He is also well-known in the West. He found that all religions have the same essence. He was very modern as he believed modern science. This broadened his view and he could see through the glass very clearly, by refusing to obey

dogmas and irrational beliefs. For he firmly believed in higher nature of man, which transcends itself and makes sacrifice. This is man's dharma, man's religion, and man's self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar.

He further suggests about sacrifice, that the lamp must give up its oil to produce its light, for the good of others, out of love, as Buddha had taught. Thereby, the lamp finds the purpose and meaning of its existence, through selfless service finding joy. We should be like the sandalwood tree, which gives shelter and by constantly diffusing itself with water, gives peace and solace to the body, and consoles the soul, composure and submission to carry on. About Gitanjali, he says,

'It was my songs that taught me all the lessons I ever learnt; they showed me secret paths, they brought before my sight many a star on the horizon of my heart. They guided me all the daylong to the mysteries of the country of pleasure and pain, and, at last, to what palace gate have they brought me in the evening at the end of my journey?'

The dharma of the poet In *Creative Unity* in 1922, Tagore sets down in the introduction the terms of discussion as his basic synthesis of values drawn from the Upanishads. He thinks that he is many in One, that is he has immense variety in his expression. A creativity that is manifold. To a great extent, Tagore is near the English Romantic poets namely- William Wordsworth, John Keats and Shelley. The universal truth given by Keats – truth is beauty; beauty truth is all pervading Tagore's conception of the principle of expression of the Infinite through beauty. Tagore is not merely replicating the Western approach, but he actually feels that the religion of poet is not encumbered in a divisive form, walls of caste, creed and practice. It is emancipated and on very high and subtle level.

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I KNOW not from what distant time thou art ever coming nearer to meet me. Thy sun and stars can never keep thee hidden from me for aye¹.

In many a morning and eve thy footsteps have been heard and thy messenger has come

within my heart and called me in secret.

I know not why to-day my life is all astir, and a feeling of tremulous joy is passing through my heart.

It is as if the time were come to wind up my work, and I feel in the air a faint smell of thy sweet presence.

Tagore's HUMANISM

The poet does not like the concept of God sitting in a decorated corner and the priest praising him. Tagore allows his god to venture among his poor, humble lot. In his poem, 'Stop this chanting and Telling of Beads', he exhorts the reader to see god among the tiller, the path-maker, and the farmer. Here he can be compared with a great Marathi poet, Sane Guruji, who also reiterates the fact that god, is found where the hard working, poor and the lowliest worker works, god is in the hands of labourer, in the creation of the potter. How can one forget a mention of Saint Tukaram, who is an ardent worshipper of Vitthal of Pandharpur? The Varkari Pantha (sect) of Maharashtra has a similar expression of their deity-worship.

In Gitanjali, Tagore has woven very intricately his thoughts, into words which are beautiful, light and bright flowers of a pattern, a garland in a thread- of extreme closeness to God. He wants to remain close to God, for the pain and suffering he went thorough after the sad passing away of the loved ones. Tagore uses repetition, inversion and alliteration, hyperbole as figures of speech to heighten his praise for the Lord. He truly belongs to the Bhakticult wherein the worshipper constantly prays God to uphold him. This pain and suffering is partly because of the sin. We all take pleasure in pain which Tagore expresses in his songs. He is a lyricist at par. Through the imagery of nature, he reaches the difficult path of offering himself to god. Though, again God is formless in Gitanjali. Yet we travel with Tagore to the doors of the Lord, who welcomes and sometimes doesn't meet him at all. So, Gitanjali becomes a wonderful expression of various moods, of days, nights, spent in the memories of the near and dear ones. His verses are the lotus flowers strewn in the path of

God or sometimes bright golden clouds offering worshipful songs or at times his songs are simply rain. This variety of thoughts and their expression – of a sea and a boatman, or of ecstatic partners, and of course love, make the Gitanjali, a rainbow of multiple colours, a weaving of garland and an offering of purity and chastity, a classical rendition of a very deeply religious mind not aware of the surroundings but lost in the path of God. Gitanjali becomes a beautiful love-song between the God and his child. It is this child like purity and innocence of Gitanjali that the more we read, the more we go deep into the thought. Tagore is very honest in expressing his love for god and accenting his will as the last, final word. He doesn't question as to why god gave him pain, but he accepts and goes on praising the lord in an attempt to redeem his pain. Loss, Which most of us is unable to do. In the spatial way, Gitanjali takes the sky, the earth, sun, moon, stars and all that carries the touch of the lord to be a part of the colourful celebration of emotions, both sad and happy, which the journey unfolds. Tagore expects god to hold him like a child who has lost his mother. As St Thomas puts it: Art presupposes religion, means just as a work of art presupposes the work of nature, so the work of nature presupposes god.

Tagore believed that it is through art one can releases one's identity with the divine. Thus artists are in a true sense liberators. Realization of the artistic life is the fulfilment of philosophic life. In the creativity of Art there is detachment from the purely physical and awareness of organic enjoyment of the Divine and the human. In The religion, Tagore says: 'The idea of the humanity of our God or the divinity of man the Eternal is the main subject of his book.' In India, philosophy and religion have intermingled as theory and practice. Tagore was courageous to speak truth. Prof. Bhupendranathstates: 'the entire religious outlook of Tagore religious philosophy. Though the actual visions were very short-lived, they left in his memory a lasting message. Is conditioned by this 'direct vision' and this provides him with forms the basis of his work.

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WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of
dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

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THIS is my prayer to thee, my lord – strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender

Thus, to conclude this paper, it would be appropriate to pay homage to a great Indian, poet and philosopher by saying that we must emancipate ourselves above the materialistic demands and be a hermit. So as to be one with the Lord and mingle with his light, overcome the walls of caste, creed and religion and breathe a pure and serene air graced by His immortal words.

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