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Man, Nature, Spiritualism and Universe through Rabindranath Tagore's Eyes

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Abstract: Spiritualism had transcended all aspects of Rabindranath's life and he looked at man and nature as images of God. He wrote in a letter, "If I have realized God or got any hint about him, then it was from this world, its people, trees, animals, dust and soil from all these objects." We therefore find the poet comprehending God as dearest to man and his companion in times of sorrow, as in the volumes of 'Geetanjali'-'Geetimalya'-'Geetali'. In 'Balaka' (1916), he depicted God as the determinant of human destiny. Ultimately, this God finds His place in the heart of man and becomes one and the same in the eyes of the poet.

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Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore, the poet- saint of India, with his creative soul endeavored upon varied literary enterprises – poetry, drama, novel and short story to mention a few, that are truly the manifestation of his realization of man's integral presence in the overall infinite and sublime purpose of the cosmic Godhead. *Sadhana*, a collection of Tagore's discourses delivered at various instances to his students at Bolpur, Bengal, contrary to his claim that these lectures do not carry any philosophical bent of mind, in fact represents the culmination of the poet's philosophy of life in a comprehensive manner. Deeply indebted to the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha, Tagore speaks from his own personal experiences at once instinctual and individual, the values of the spirit which enables man to achieve communion with the divine in his everyday life. Comprising of eight titles –'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe', 'Soul Consciousness', 'The Problem of Evil', 'The Problem of Self', 'Realization in Love', 'Realization in Action', 'The Realization of Beauty' and 'The Realization of the Infinite', the poet has offered in this collection the ways and means of attaining the ultimate purpose in human life -that is to become one with the Infinite.

Rabindranath Tagore's plays are no literary works dissociated from his philosophy. Rather his plays, pregnant with symbols and predominantly allegorical, significantly convey his philosophical beliefs. Therefore, scanning his play Autumn Festival in isolation in search of clues suggesting Tagore's affinity with nature would be a fatuous attempt.

Exploration of Tagore's perspectives on the fusion of the macrocosmic identities of universe and nature with the microcosmic identity of the human individual demands a brief but close examination of his philosophical belief. This article explores Tagore's philosophical views on life and nature, and inspects their reflection on his literary work with focus on Autumn Festival. The play was originally published in Bengali as Sharadotsab (1908). Tagore himself reworked on Sharadotsab twice: Autumn Festival (1919), the English translation, and Rinshodh (1921), a physical and philosophical expansion.

While translating Sharadotsab into Autumn Festival, Tagore shortened the play considerably, dropping much of the original's symbols, cultural connotations and a good number of its quintessential songs. This essay, in the attempt of exploring Tagore's holistic approach towards nature through all three renderings of the play, addresses the three versions as one composite literary entity and often refers to Sharadotsab and Autumn Festival as interchangeable terms.

The philosophy of Tagore is essentially rooted in the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic traditions of India and accentuated by mysticism. All these philosophical schools put nature at a revered position. The Upanishadas impart the central seat to brahman, or the Supreme Being or the Absolute, who creates the

universe, nurtures it, destroys it when time comes, and again gives birth to the universe.

Thus the cycle of creation, the cycle of life, goes on; and during the ceaseless movement of the cycle, a close bond between the Creator and His creation the universe is established. It is by means of being nurtured by and experiencing nature that a human being becomes truly capable of realising the bond between him and the Absolute. This understanding is the foundation of Tagore's philosophy.

Although the Absolute as the Creator and the world His creation might appear to be binary opposite entities, they actually are not. They are not contradictory but complementary entities leading to the totality of the universe. Radhakrishnan, while discussing shortcoming of the understanding of God by the Western world in terms of understanding the Absolute, observes:

The God of theism is only an aspect of the Absolute, an appearance of a deeper reality. Modern theism, aware of this difficulty, lays stress on Divine immanence, thus watering down the personal God into the Absolute whole. The views here […] do not give us a philosophic synthesis of God, world and self, for in a true synthesis we cannot have absolute divisions between man and nature.

We need a principle, superior to them all, which would assign to each, self and not-self, its appropriate value, and give harmony to their mutual relations; a principle of synthesis which would comprehend both elements and transform their apparent antagonism into an organic relationship.[1]

Tagore's philosophy of life offers this 'principle of synthesis'. A man with complete faith in the soul of ancient India, he states that 'the state of realising our relationship with all, of entering into everything through union with God, was considered in India to be the ultimate end and fulfilment of humanity'.[2]

Tagore believes that in seeking to be united with the infinite lies the fulfilment of the finite, human, individual being. Delving again into the Vedantic tradition, considers the concepts of maya (appearance) and satyam (truth), he observes that 'our self is maya where it is merely individual and finite, where it considers its separateness as absolute; it is satyam where it recognises its essence in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self, in Paramatman' (Sādhanā, p. 313).

He negates the contrariness of nature between man (the world in general) and the Absolute because man, the being with intellectual, aesthetic and emotional faculties, forms the most essential part of the Creation of the Absolute; thus the soul of man or jivatman becomes the microcosm of the paramatman, and therefore the complementary element to prove the organic totality of the universe.

And because man is the microcosmic identity of this all-pervading paramatman, who is also the fountainhead of pure bliss and epitomises unmixed joy or anandam, he reaches the state of ecstasy and tastes the same anandam once he unites with the Absolute. Thus the ultimate manifestation of humanity is attained.

It is a quest of man to attain the Absolute that enables him to taste the divine joy – not only upon reaching the goal, but also in the path of the journey, while he embraces all world into his heart. This quest is an inward journey as well, for this is a quest after man's own soul as well.

Therefore knowing the Absolute Self and one-self, the macrocosm and the microcosmic, is a continuous and simultaneous process. The motif of journey is very common in Tagore, especially in numerous of his songs we find them, signifying this quest for union with the Absolute. In realisation of man's eternal quest for the Absolute, he writes:

The day I surged out, singing your song, is not today| I have forgotten since when I have been longing for you – it is not from today.[3]

Being the microcosm of the Absolute, man has the right to taste the divine ecstasy or ananda, but he has to earn it. He earns by embracing the omnipresence of the Absolute in every atom of the world – even in miseries and pains – securing himself in the organic wholeness of the world. Tagore holds that the miseries of human life are nothing but stepping stones of attaining the Absolute where He is interchangeable with ananda.

Man gets to taste this absolute joy in pursuit of the Supreme Being, throughout his quest for the Absolute. It is through this divine bliss, which Tagore hails as amrita or the life-giving nectar, that a human individual can realise the loving and caring touch of the Absolute. Tagore explains passionately while discussing 'realization [of the Absolute] in love'

The immortal being manifests himself in joy-form. His manifestation in creation is out of his fulness of joy. It is the nature of this abounding joy to realise itself in form which is law […]

The amritam, the immortal bliss, has made himself into two. Our soul is the loved one, it is his other self. We are separate; but if this separation were absolute, then there would have been absolute misery and unmitigated evil in this world. […] But on the contrary, we find that the separateness of objects is in a fluid state. Their individualities are ever changing, they are meeting and merging into each other, till science itself is turning into metaphysics, matter losing its boundaries, and the definition of life becoming more and more indefinite.

Yes, our individual soul has been separated from the supreme soul, but this has not been from alienation but from the fulness of love. (Sādhanā, p. 320)

Man finds ananda, the insignia of the love of the Supreme Being, and through it the Absolute Himself, abounding in nature. To Tagore nature is the stage on which the drama of the universal life is enacted in full grandeur of its harmony. Walking the path of pantheism, Rabindranath suggests that it is in nature that the love of the Supreme Being is reflected and that love, being showered upon every particle of the universe including man, manifests itself as the embodiment of the Absolute Himself:

Yes, I know, this is nothing but thy love, O beloved of my heart – this golden light that dances upon the leaves, these idle clouds sailing across the sky, this passing breeze leaving its coolness upon my forehead.

The morning light has flooded my eyes – this is thy message to my heart. Thy face is bent from above, thy eyes look down on my eyes, and my heart has touched thy feet.[4]

And Tagore believed that man must observe his duty to the Absolute and the universe by returning this love to them.

It goes without saying that nature being placed on the high altar of deeper spiritual understanding on Tagore's part was but another facet of his profound faith in the Upanishadic philosophy and his integration of the ancient Indian way of life into his individual soul. Originated in and nourished by the forests, civilisation in ancient India imbibed the very distinct qualities nature can teach man.

To him the forests were no stage of contesting powers and unbridled violence; to him the epitome of forests was tapovana (the forests where the ancient sages founded their hermitages) where 'the soul is in complete union with all the natural elements and the flora and fauna. Man is neither estranged from, nor has any discord with his surroundings'[5].

The ancient civilisation blooming in North India benefitted from nature in terms of numerous materials necessary for everyday life as well as in terms of intellectual and spiritual development of the individual soul. This civilisation did not posit nature as the binary opposite element to man that must be conquered in order to establish man's superiority in the world and satisfy his ego; not separating man from his surroundings, this civilisation taught him to look at himself as an integral part of the surrounding nature.

The close proximity of nature allowed the vivacious life force of the surrounding nature to seep in man, aiding him in recognising his position in the organic synthesis of the universe; in realising his relation with the Absolute; in tasting the all-pervasive divine bliss or amritam. Thus the spirit of nature, reflecting the bountiful benevolence of the Absolute, reflected in the soul of man. This is the way, Tagore believed, in which man can realise the oneness with the Creator and His creation the universe.

Decidedly the influence of the Romantic authors of Tagore cannot be denied while discussing his view of nature. His works ostensibly captures the spirit of Romanticism; but he moves ahead of the Romantic dreams and ideals, adding an edge to the Romantic perception with a marked Upanishadic sensitivity.

His poem 'Barshasesh' clearly has the imprint of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', but his appeal to the Absolute becomes more personal as well as universal throughout the poem as he calls for the destructive force of His to torment nature in order for man to realise the message of regeneration out of the ash of destruction – an eternal law of nature ordained by Him which teaches man to conquer death by accepting it. At the same time, Tagore is no less a "high priest of nature" than Wordsworth. Wordsworth expresses his intense communion with nature and with the divine presence through her:

[…] And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

Throughout his literary career, Tagore sought after this communion of man, nature and God, and his philosophy gradually shaped into the manifestation of the idea of jivandevata – translating literally as 'the God of life'. But Tagore was not only well-versed in Upanishadas, but also acquainted with mysticism, which predominantly worship God as beloved.

He surpasses Wordsworth in realising the nature of the Supreme Being in an essential Eastern and mystic way while conceiving Him as the beloved, uttering, 'O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?' (Gitanjali, 56, p. 51). In Tagore's mind the perceptions of the spiritual beauty of the pursuit of the Absolute and the physical beauty of nature were fused to form a unique notion of interchangeability of beauty, universal truth and all-pervasive goodness. Commenting on Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Tagore observed:

In this there is a suggestion that truth reveals itself in beauty. For if beauty were mere accident, a rent in the eternal fabric of things, then it would hurt, would be defeated by the antagonism of facts. Beauty is no phantasy, it has the everlasting meaning of reality. The facts that cause despondence and gloom are mere mist, and when through the mist beauty breaks out in momentary gleams, we realise that Peace is true and not conflict, Love is true and not hatred; and Truth is the One, not the disjointed multitude. We realize that Creation is the perpetual harmony between the infinite ideal of perfection and the eternal continuity of its realisation […].[7]

The ideals of truth, good and beauty (satyam-sivam-sundaram) have been cherished by Tagore, who wished to view man very much as a part of the universal harmony, ordained by the Absolute Himself. Man, therefore, in Tagore's view, is bound to realise the full potential of his individuality only by recognising his position in the harmony of the universe and working in tandem with the universal laws of nature. The cycle of life and death throughout the organism of the universe concurs with this preordained natural law.

Therefore, man can only cherish the ultimate ananda when he becomes aware of his position in the natural organism and his duty towards the Absolute by abiding by the natural harmony and returning his love through affectionate and sympathetic treatment of his surroundings. Thus, man also realises within him the spirit of the deathless eternity pervading through nature and him. Radhakrishnan observes:

The universe is the eternal sacrifice of the supreme. The Bhagavadgita says: "The whole world rests on sacrifice. It is the law of the universe." He is sacrificing himself that nature and humanity may live. This self-sundering of the whole in which the world is contained is but the expression of his joy and the law of the universe […] The outburst of joy is needed for the realisation of the concrete richness of the world. The universe is new-born continually, as a result of this joy. (pp. 30-31)

The realisation of the legacy of the eternal, universal spirit within his soul and that the fulfilment of human life lies in submitting the wealth of his soul in abundance to the feet of the absolute – just as nature gladly does to fulfil her duty – permeate man's heart with love for the Absolute. Tagore, in whom romanticism fused with mysticism to give a new direction (imparting a unique dimension) to the very concept of love, viewed God not only as a benevolent father (as teaches the Upanishadas or Christianity), but also as a lover and a beloved friend, who soothes a bereaved heart patiently.

At the same time can be loved and wondered at even when he manifests in His fiercest, destructive form, which is another facet of the universal harmony. Nature becomes a medium of conversation between man and the Absolute in all these forms; therefore man's love, reaching out to the Absolute, reaches out in essence to nature herself, and thus his quest continues.

Tagore again betrays his Romantic bent when time and again he goes back to the literature and culture of the post-Vedic classical age of India to bring into being the ideal state of man's close communion with nature. Various episodes of the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Jayadeva's Gita-Govinda or Kalidasa's Meghaduta, Abhijnana-Sakuntala and Ritusamhara (to pinpoint at some of the classical literary pieces indulging in depicting nature in all her splendour) celebrate that relation between man and nature which is full of love and joy. The anomaly of the natural order in the act of two hunters killing a couple of lovemaking egrets triggered the poetic outburst in Balmiki, the master poet of the Ramayana.

Tagore's choice of this very legend as the subject for his opera Balmikipratibha[8] (which depicts the transformational journey of Balmiki from a ferocious robber to a poet with love and sympathy for all the organism of the universe, ultimately recognising through it the Absolute, who appears before him in the form of goddess Saraswati and inspires his creativity) as early as in 1881 reveals his firm belief from very

early in his life in the positive role of nature in bringing out the good in man from the depth of his soul.

Later in many of his poems and plays he fused the elements of natural descriptions from Indian classics with the beauty of nature (predominantly of Bengal) he himself experienced in his long life. Some perfect examples of such kind are his poems 'Meghdut'[9] and 'Barshamangal'[10].

Santiniketan is the place where Tagore spent a significantly major part of his life, cherishing all the splendour nature has to offer man. His fondness for the surrounding natural backdrop of the ashrama was so great as to lead him to compose a series of poems on the flora and fauna of the ashrama, which was later published as the volume Banabani (1931).

The awareness of the essence of the close relation with nature induced Tagore gradually to celebrate this companionship in forms of season festivals with all the residents of Santiniketan ashrama, especially the students. Tagore's complete faith in nature led him to believe as an educationist that the holistic development of young souls is possible only in custody of nature. He started programmes in which the participants would celebrate the essence of every season, remembering their connection with nature.

From 1926 these musical festivals came to be held at Santiniketan[11], but since long before that the idea of celebrating through drama the deep connection of human existence with nature and seasons, the manifestation of the cyclical pattern of life in man and nature alike, the very fact that nature is the endless resource of the divine joy to man occurred to Tagore. Autumn Festival is such a play in which Tagore addressed these aspects of the eternal quest, the simultaneous inward-and-outward journey of man.

Autumn Festival falls within the ambit of the symbolic plays of Tagore which have won him a unique seat of honour in international dramaturgy. At his best, his symbolic plays become perfect vehicles of his ideas, whereas music plays a pivotal part (though critics like Thompson and charge them with excess of symbolism at the cost of loose plot and action[12], others like Iyengar praise the lucid creativity with which Tagore uses symbols in them[13]).

Chronologically, Sharadotsab is the first of Tagore's season plays. Although the play was initially written to be staged by the students of Santiniketan on the occasion of the autumnal holiday, and therefore the holiday mood permeates through it, it certainly proves to be an allegory representing Tagore's philosophy of synthesis of man, nature and the Absolute.

The characters in allegories are not individualistic in nature, but representative and therefore stock. It would not be entirely wrong to state that this play sees the prototypes of the characters representative of Tagore's various ideas from his later allegorical plays. Nature strikingly becomes a most important character in Sharadotsab, for Tagore presents the interrelations of human individuals as well as between man and the Absolute occurring in the lap of and evolving around nature.

The setting of Sharadotsab is pastoral Indian autumn, pervaded with the joyous air of festival and holiday. Although sharadotsab literally is a composite of sharat (autumn) and utsab (festival) – and the English title might ambiguously suggest literariness of translation – the word has an implied meaning which refers to the autumnal festival of Durgapuja, the greatest festival of Bengal.

Spiritualism in Tagore's Poetry

Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual outlook and humanism were derived from man, nature and Brahma or God. He held the view that the route to spiritual development was from 'body to society, from society to totality and from totality to the spiritual domain'. In this way, the melody of the soul was intertwined with the universal power. But what was required for this inter-mingling was connecting the world of nature with that of human beings. To Tagore, the whole human body appeared to be reverberating with the touch of light, air, affection, love, bliss, joy and electricity, as if embedded in a supernatural flute. Although he might have been influenced by the romantic movements of the time, the Brahma Samaj, the Bauls, Sufism or the Vedanta philosophy of Upanishads, those views were in some respects Tagore's very own. We can very well comprehend how his spirit was liberated by connecting with the universe, the nature and the environment which surrounded him, by looking at the following lines:

"Where He has given himself up through his infinite mirth and youthfulness, there is no dearth of affluence there, no limit to variety, and the riches are unending. There, the sky is lit in a thousand directions wearing the girdles of stars; there, beauty surfaces in so many new forms, the gushing of the spirit never stops." By connecting with our environment in this manner, our self-consciousness becomes sweeter, deeper and brighter. The man within us grows into a fuller entity. Our soul seems to mingle with His colours and flavour. Rabindranath had

identified this phenomenon as devotion. He said, "The poet's task is to ignite this awareness in the consciousness of man, to transform indifference into a newer zeal. That poet is great in the eyes of humans who diffuses human hearts with the attributes of constancy, grandeur, freedom, omnipresence and depth."

This theme of liberation of the spirit is found in many of Rabindranath's poems. There is thus a new excitement for self-expansion in 'Kalpana' "Oh bird, my bird / blind, don't fold your wings now". The formula for revival of the self encompassed the spirit of the universe. This inseparability of the self is made clearer in the poem 'Anobachchhinna Ami' "I saw under the infinite sky / I rock while seated on the swing of light". In the 'Geetanjali-Geetimalya-Geetali' phase, the soul of Rabindranath could become one with the cosmos.

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