



Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore: Man, God and Nature

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore has been called a poet rather than a philosopher. But as every intellectual man has his own view or philosophy, so had Tagore. His writings depict the philosophy of this literary man. One of the coherent view of his life is: "Let that little be left of me whereby I may name thee my all"
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Introduction:

Distinguishes between goodness and pleasure and says that while pleasure is limited to one's own self, "goodness is concerned with the happiness of all humanity and for all time" (57). Again to live in perfect goodness means to realize one's life in the infinite. He draws from Buddha's teachings at this juncture to reiterate the point that when the individual is merged in the universal then man is freed from the thralldom of pain. It is therefore important to realize the 'world-man' in oneself who remains unaffected by death and suffering and one who understands that pain is but the other side of joy.

In the lecture on 'Problem of Self', Tagore discusses how the self is responsible for the sufferings and the sins that man commits; "It has led man to shame and crime and death; yet it is dearer to him than any paradise where the self lies, securely slumbering in perfect innocence in the womb of Mother Nature" (70). It is in a state of ignorance that we believe that self is an end in itself. It is only dharma that can deliver man from his selfishness or self-centeredness. 'Dharma' as Tagore interprets for us is the "the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. Dharma is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self" (74). The true nature or essence of our being is the godliness inherent within us. This can be realized only when selfishness is extinguished from us. In recalling the words of Buddha, Tagore says:

Tagore's talk on the 'Realization of Love' hinges upon the concept of the infinite love of Brahma that manifests itself through finite forms. It is said that though bound by the laws of the world, so as to lead a

disciplined and moral life, the human soul sets on its passage from bondage in law to freedom in love. Tagore alludes to Buddha's idea of *Brahma-vihara*, or the joy of living in Brahma. This idea entails the proposition that the one, who overcomes pride, hatred, deception, anger, cruelty, and antagonism towards fellow beings and fellow creatures, cultivates the quality of love for all creatures in the process of exercising universal goodwill, attains perfection of consciousness (Tagore 106). Imbibing this key thought from Buddha's teachings, Tagore asserts that: "It is through the heightening of our consciousness into love, and extending it all over the world, that we can attain *Brahma-vihara*, communion with this infinite joy". In the name of civilization man indulges in cannibalism that deadens consciousness and results in a kind of spiritual suicide. Probably Tagore here refers to the imperial British who deprived nations like India of self-government and self-defence.

The 'Oneness' of Man and God:

According to Tagore, man is a part of this inscrutable, Immanent God. The finite is a part of Infinite, whom God has created after putting a barrier in Him. As Tagore says.

(Poem 71)

"Thou settest a barrier in thine own being
This thy self-separation has taken body in
me"

Man shouldn't be lost in the grief of separateness because ultimately he has to meet his creator, his inevitable source, the father of mankind, God. Man is the coloured shadow of God, God separates Himself into many forms, one is man.

Tagore believes that the same life runs through the vein of man which runs through Him. Tagore speaks of the all pervasiveness of God. He is the impelling force within man. He is "the innermost one" who "awakens my being within his deep hidden touches" But man forgets about this truth because of God's created maya and man seeks Him everywhere with an unsatisfactory mind and soul and he is - unable to feel this omnipresence in himself. As in Upanishads, says the Rishi about this mystic experience.

"The purusha (man) alone in all this universe, sacrifice, penance, Brahma, the highest mortal; he who knows this, hidden in the cave of the heart breaks the knot of ignorance even here, O gentle youth!".

Again:

"The person of the size of a thumb, resides in the middle of the body, as lord of the past and the future, and hence-forward fear no more." (Kathopanishad. IV. 12)

This is the intense Advaita faith: yet no abstraction. The divinity, the poet-self humanity, all living beings; the world of Natural Phenomena - are all unified in an indescribable rhythmic process of vitality which is also unutterably serene. The philosophy of Tagore is that everything flows towards God as everything comes from Him, being His own part. Everything 'run back to thee undiminished' to the poet's poet, lord of life, to the ultimate aim, the creator, the mother, the father, the infinite one. So short is 'the pang of separation', the sorrow of separation'.

Love of God: Nature:

Life is harmony, and the law or principle which governs its rhythms is the principal of love and joy. And the love dwells everywhere as His Omnipresence. Like man Nature is also one of the myriad notes, His creation, the source of joy and His love for mankind. The river, flower, sun, moon, stars, trees, leaves all symbolize His love for mankind. These are the token of love of God for man. That is why:

(Poem 75)

"Thy gifts to us mortals fulfil all our needs and yet run back to thee undiminished."

The rivers run through villages and wind at the end to wash His feet. The flowers sweeten the air and offer themselves up to Him. The world thus gets so many benefits in Nature from God. The morning with the golden basket in her right hand, the sunbeams, 'the golden light all is wrapped with His love 'comes unto the mankind'. Tagore feels His immortal love, care, affection and human joy in the light coming from His heavenly abode.

(Poem 59)

"Light, my light, the world filling light, the eye kissing light, heart sweetening light!"

This light that dances upon the leaves and the joy that engulfs the whole world in laughter is nothing but His love. Nature and God are, in the Vedantic terminology, Prakriti and Purusha, the two aspects of Absolute. Meditation on Nature or an aspect of Nature leads to realisation of God. About the Gayatri Tagore said:

"The text of our everyday meditation is the Gayatri, a verse which is considered to be the epitome of all the Vedas. By its help we try to realise the essential unity of 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 an unbroken continuity with the outer world." Nature, according to Tagore, is the melody of God. It ennobles man. Man is ultimately bound with nature.

Shri Khanolkar narrates one incident which he calls the turning point in Tagore's life: One morning he was sitting in the veranda with his face to the east, he beheld an extraordinary sight just before him, the sun was climbing inch by inch, through the top most sprays of the thickly leaved trees in the free school compound at the further end of the road. Masses of golden light streamed from the foliage. As Tagore gazed wide-eyed, it was as though a curtain was ripped aside to show an altogether different scene. The familiar pattern of the world was transformed and filled with a wondrous radiance. On every hand, his eyes met wave upon wave of beauty and happiness. Was he experiencing in himself the scripture's "Peace and love of God-in-man which shines after the form of bliss immortal? With that brilliance flooding all the poet's heart the layers of grief and despair were stripped away, and waves of delight and loveliness ripples through his innermost being" This was a turning point in his life the whole attitude to life was changed at once. He left an inner conviction that the world had "risen from a sea of joy, was floating in a sea of joy and would subside again" in sea of joy. From there onwards he was free from any kind of grief. To Tagore Nature is not just an imaginary country in a fairyland. It is the "embodied joy of the Infinite." Friendship, love and compassion are life's necessities. In order to know God we need not turn away from life and world. The bridge by which we can pass from the imperfect to the perfect is love.

What is God

God, for Tagore, is the eternal, all pervasive, immanent, inscrutable, inevitable, omnipresent, omnipotent, kind and affectionate spirit.

He fills His creation with fresh life. Mankind is like a flute through which He sings His eternal songs. He is the musician of musicians. He is the mother, and He is the father, the Absolute, as Shakti and Shiva are inseparable. God helps everyone. He is the bearer of our burdens. Tagore says:

(Poem 9)

"Leave all thy burdens on his hands who can bear all, and never look behind in regret."

He keeps the company with the companionless amongst the humble folk. The poorest the lowest and the lost are dearer to Him than any one else. The rich and the bourgeois are far removed from God because of their artificial living. That is why the Bible says:

"Blessed are the pure for they shall see God."

Again: "He is above all, through all and in all."

And Tagore says:

"And there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost."

(Poem 10)

God is within man. He dwells in Nature. The worldly pomp and the growing ego becomes a great wall that makes one lose sight of one's true being within. According to Vedanta the root cause of everything that binds a man is ego. The pure, honest and humble heart can achieve his spiritual bliss. He grants perfect freedom to the persons. He loves and continues to love them even if they do not pray to Him or keep Him in their hearts. God is won over easily by love and not by scholarship or austere practices. The king of all kings is the nest in which man's soul develops. He is the one, the ruler, the internal Atman of all beings.

The Communion with God: Mystic Union: The Spiritual Bliss

Mysticism: The term can be defined as the belief in the existence of state of reality hidden from ordinary human understanding. Mysticism is gaining direct communion with God through prayer and meditation. The mystic feels that the supreme soul or God is one and the same but assumes different forms. He believes that "all things in the visible world are but forms and manifestations of the one Divine Life, and that these phenomena are changing and temporary; while the soul that informs them is eternal." A mystic is thoroughly a traditional. He distrusts reason and intellect the world of sense and perception has no meaning for him. A mystic believes that human soul is eternal. It is the body which dies; the soul lives on. Death for him is merely a transformation or the only gateway to the eternal. The soul comes to the world from the Eternal and assumes a particular form; after death it still lives on in the Eternal and may assume some different form. This was also the faith of Plato,

and this has always been the faith of mystics. It is also the basis of Tagore's view of life.

Tagore's mysticism is slightly different from the above. He is not a thorough - going mystic, for he does not completely distrust reason and sense perception. Moreover, Tagore's mysticism has certain peculiar features. Unlike most other mystics Tagore does not advocate a dissociation from everyday life. On the other hand, he is full of joy of living. He does not reject sense experience. But makes it a medium of spiritual experience. Nor is Tagore the least inclined towards asceticism. Tagore's mysticism is thus counter balanced and kept in check by his intense humanism. Similarly his realistic tendency also restrains his mystic learnings. Thus mysticism is only one strand in his viewpoint. However, in certain crucial aspects Tagore subscribes fully to the mystical approach.

His Mystical Doctrine:

Tagore believes in the spiritual bliss, divine inspiration and reunion of soul with God. He says that the ultimate aim of life is to seek a merging with the divine spirit. That is why the theme of a spiritual quest is so recurrent in Tagore's poetry. The mystic's conception of ultimate bliss is union with God, which is also the Indian conception of nirvana. The human soul craves for reunion, as it is a part of God, separated from the Infinite seeking for re-union. Tagore believes that the quest for God can be completed only after the divine inspiration. He always wait for His son, man to surrender Him to this totality. The spiritual illumination makes a man realize His presence and truth about Him. He is affectionate as a mother, caring as a father, a compassionate friend and a guide who leads man in his spiritual voyage to the sea of eternity.

"I must launch out my boat"

"Early in the day it was whispered that

We should sail in a boat... Only thou and?"

God and man has a relation of love and devotion rather than fear. The human soul is a part of Divine Spirit but it is finite. Its fulfilment, therefore has in its fusion with the Infinite. According to Tagore the world of Nature is not an illusion but a medium for achieving oneness with the Infinite. His philosophy reconciles the two opposites of body and spirit and all the related ideas. He advocates a similar co-existence and harmony between illusion and reality, death and life which alternate to form a rhythmic process. Evil and good, imperfection and perfection also are similarly related. Truth and Beauty are only facets of the Infinite. The following lines from the Gitanjali contain an expression of Tagore's mystical belief in the Infinite which is present in the finite and is yet apart from it:

"Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows? They push these and pass thee by on the duty roads, taking thee for naught. I wait here weary hours spreading my offerings for thee, while passers by come and take my flowers one by one, and my basket is nearly empty. Oh how indeed could I tell them that for thee I wait, and that thou has promised to come. How could I utter for shame that I keep for my dowry this poverty. An, I hug this pride in the secret of my heart."

Expression of his Mysticism:

Tagore's mysticism finds expressions through image and symbols. This is only befitting, for mysticism is too intangible a view to be expressed directly. Many of Tagore's symbols are drawn from the world of nature. One of his favourite symbols is a flower, Flower expresses beauty, vitality, sacrifice, devotion, life, joy, the mystery of birth and death. The love of devotee is expressed as the offering of flowers to his lover, God. The symbol of light symbolizes the warmth of love of God, spiritual illumination, divine glory, His omnipresence, His imminence, all-pervasiveness and joy of creation. The boat is a mystical symbol of spiritual voyage through the sea of eternity. The sword is another mystical symbol of detachment, the way to gain the heavenly abode, the renunciation of luxuries of world.

"Thy sword is with me to cut asunder my bonds and there shall be no fear left for me in the world."

Cloud is used with romantic associations. It also stands for God's grace. "The sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless. I know not what this is that steers within me, - I know not its meaning." The sea symbolizes the sea of eternity, the way to heavenly abode. The other mystical expression of sea is the life sea' the vast deep sea of life.

Deathlessness in Death:

Tagore's philosophy of death is beyond human understanding or comprehension. He seems to feel that death is inherent in nature and therefore lodged within him. It is the last fulfilment of life. The soul opens to death like "a bud in the forest at midnight". "Because I love this life," he says, "I know I shall love death as well." Dying into Death here is dying into the deathless. It is an amorous adventure undertaken in a stormy night. It is a wedding for Tagore. The soul plays with the Lord as the beloved plays with her lover. In poem 91 he says "that flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom. After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her lord alone in the solitude of the night".

The poet wants to go to meet his lord in wedding robes because he says that red brown robes mark renunciation. Tagore believes that dying is not simple literal annihilation of spirit and matter. Dying is concomitant with the release of spirit. Death, for him, is the intimation of immortality. He sees "by the light of death thy world with its careless treasures." He speaks of a mystic. For him love and death are inseparable companions.

Death is inevitable and man has to surrender himself before it in all his totality. When death strikes, all that man has ignored or spurned earlier will appear more valuable. So love well while alive.

The perfection is Everywhere-Optimism:

The another philosophy of Tagore is that there is no imperfection, no fault in the world. Losses, pessimism and faults finding aren't in his dictionary. In Gitanjali one of his poems expresses his view. He, in poem 78 criticises the attitude of those who find fault with the world in some way or other. His mantra is:

"Vain is this seeking! Unbroken perfection is over all"

Tagore's view of life is tremendously optimistic. Says Sen Gupta, "Rabindranath cannot find any room for ugliness. Truth and beauty are omnipresent, representing, respectively, the law and the harmony of the universe. So there can be no ugliness or untruth in life, it is man's incapacity to see life as a whole that gives rise to untruth and ugliness. Untruth and ugliness, in his view are found only in our comprehension as the negative elements of truth and beauty. If man can get over his selfishness and view things in a detached manner, if, in other words, he can rise them to the region of the surplus he can have the true vision of beauty that is everywhere."

The Religion of Humanism:

Tagore is a great poet of Man. The spiritual quest, without human element, has no appeal for Tagore. To him God is incarnated in human form, and it is in human activity and labour that one must look for Him and not in lonely meditation and penance. Tagore disapproved of asceticism because it is anti-humanistic. He simply says

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

He believes to live in this world and love his people. He is busy in the hectic world and says

"No, I will never shut the door of my senses."

Tagore's attitude to man and nature is quite comparable to that of Keats who believed that even for the apprehension of great spiritual truths one must employ one's sense perceptions. Tagore's pursuit

and celebration of beauty are also guided by a humanistic spirit. Tagore's poetry sings not only of ideal beauty but also of beauty as incarnated in the human form, especially the female form. However, because of influence of ancient Indian tradition, even human beauty sometimes becomes a symbol of the ideal beauty of the Divine being. The most remarkable poem of Tagore which celebrates the beauty of the female form is Urvashi. This is derived from the ancient Indian myth of the birth of Urvashi, the symbol of eternal beauty, who like the Greek goddess of love arose from the sea. This poem has received glowing tributes from critics.

Concept of Jivan Devata:

Besides the conception of God, we find Tagore has mentioned about Jivan devata in many of his poems. According to Pramath Nath Bishi his Jivan devata is not God. "Man has two lives-personal and impersonal. At one place man is one with the whole creation and at another has individual existence both these are real at the same time. Jivan devata is God of this private personal life. Tagore has imagined a deity of his own life who is the main source of inspiration for him. This deity is dwelling in his heart and is guiding his life, every activity and every achievement of him. Thus, Tagore's God is all, but He is particular also. Jivan devata of Tagore, as he expresses, is not identical with God of popular religious systems. But, at the same time he is not completely different from the Absolute. The one reality on the one hand expresses himself through the world - his creation, on the other hand he is deity of the poet's life, his lover, friend and guide. We cannot have proper idea of his real nature if we look at him as separate from the world. In reality Jivan devata is another form of God of the world. The difference between Jivan devata and the Absolute, thus is secondary. Tagore's God is a moving reality like that of Bergson's but at the same time, he is static, unchangeable. The creator God makes Himself finite and forms intimate relationship with man. He is a dearest to soul, resides inside human mind. Thus this idea of Jivan devata of the poet is humanistic. But in reality He is not finite. He willingly makes Himself finite and expresses Himself in many forms though He is without any form. The poet's Jivan devata in his other aspect creates the world, expresses Himself through nature, therefore, the poet feels the unity of his soul with the whole world. Jivan devata is the inspiring force for his world consciousness, and when this unity of one's soul with the whole world becomes possible, all imperfections of one's life vanishes, and his life proceeds towards fullness and perfection. Thus Jivan devata is the connecting bridge between one's personal and universal life.

The Reunion: Communion with God

In Gitanjali, many poems of Tagore expresses the cry of soul for the re-union with God. Tagore believes that man is a part of God and as he comes from Him the ultimate end is he will come to Him again. Tagore believes in communion with God, he wishes for His presence near by him, to enjoy His bliss rather than merging into Him. Tagore's concept of reunion and oneness expresses his wish for His spiritual company, His presence beside him in his boat of spiritual Voyage. For him, it is more desirable to finite man to get the company of Infinite than to absolutely one with the Supreme person.

The quest of Tagore begins with this wish of merging into Him, craving for Him and when he realized the truth, the realization of God and his creation, he aspires for divine presence and divine company.

Tagore expresses in his later poems in Gitanjali that this is after spiritual illumination that man identifies the real heaven. For him a heaven beyond this world is unintelligible. The heaven may be infinite but it is not Absolute. So this is our good fortune that we have come down to this world due to our virtues. World is a place more desirable than heaven and so a virtuous soul only can come to world. The beauties of the world, the pleasure, pain, sorrow and happiness of the world attract the mind of the poet so much that he did not want to go to a heaven which is a place of eternal happiness, leaving this world. In a poem he says that let there be the heaven full of joy, but the world should remain as it is mixed with pleasure and pain. He believes that to believe in separate heaven other than this world is to disbelieve the complete truth of God. He has not created any other world, because to do that is to create contradiction in truth which is unique.

Soul and Salvation:

Tagore believes in two terms soul and self, atman and aham which are present in an individual. One true nature of soul is enveloped by narrow finite self in us, which is egoistic, impulsive in nature. Soul is deathless and this self or aham is destructible in nature. But the lower self always follows the immortal soul of us. Due to our ignorance or avidya we think that to satisfy it and to live the life of self is our ultimate goal of life. But it is our wrong view. To make self the ultimate aim of our life, we are doomed to disappointment like the man who tries to reach his destination by firmly clutching the dust of road. Tagore says that the truth is the atman, the soul, beyond material possessions. Soul is above it, this is the highest truth.

But when this soul is bounded by selfish desires of narrow self it loses its significance. Tagore

believes that aham is created so that man can dedicate it. Tagore believes in the importance of self also. He suggests that the real aim of our soul is to unite itself with the world, the soul can find its truth when it unifies with others. So when it does perceive the unity and harmony which is present between the soul of man and the world, when the true nature of soul is revealed, it gives up itself for the love of mankind.

Tagore's concept of salvation is totally different from the Advaita conception of salvation, where, the individual merges into Brahman and loses its existence. The state of salvation is for them the state of complete absorption, complete merging of the one in the other. But Tagore doesn't believe in this concept of mukti, as his work expresses, where the separateness between Jiva and Brahman is ended. He wants to live communion with God, but never wants to be identical with him. He looks at him as his friend and guide sitting beside him in the boat of spiritual voyage in Gitanjali. God has created man who is His part and spiritually enlightened man craves for the company with his creator rather than merging into Him and become one. Tagore believes that if one becomes completely merged in the Absolute, then how can he enjoy the company of his Divine Lover. Thus, salvation for them is not a state of absolute oneness of soul and God. In Indian philosophical system it is generally believed that when the soul realizes its real nature and becomes perfect, it rises beyond the chain of birth and death and does not reborn again. But, Tagore wants to take birth in this world again and again which is the theme of one of his poems in Gitanjali, where the poet prays for rebirth after death.

"renew his life like a flower under the cover of thy kindly night."

According to him man takes rebirth so that through the successive births he can become more perfect, but this process goes on forever, as man can never attain complete perfection. Worldly existence is not a bondage for him. If that is bondage, then he wants to accept this bondage willingly and happily as the Creator also joyfully has taken bondage upon himself.

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of free dom in a thousand bonds of delight."

God has manifested himself through the beauties of nature. So to run away from the universe is to go away from God. Man and world are bound by one thread which cannot tear off; people say that to do that is our mukti, but Tagore doesn't believe in this. To practise austerity or meditate sitting in a corner is not the way to get salvation for Rabindranath. He says,

"Salvation in a hermit's cave?

No, not for me,

I shall retain a thousand ties and in their midst savour the bliss of liberation."

The world is the visible expression of God and so to enjoy the beauties of nature through our senses is to feel His presence. Like the Buddhists he never asks for controlling senses. But like the Upanishadic sages who prayed for making one's senses strong he says, "No I shall never shut the door of my sense. The delight of sight and hearing and touch will bear the delight, yea all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love." Hence one can realize God, living in this world and being a member of the society and family. We can live in the active communion of God living in our society through the bonds of love and affection. In one of the poems he expresses this view when at midnight would be ascetic comes out of home for leaving family and home,

"God sighed and complained, why does my servant wonder to seek me forsaking me!"

Human life and world are not mirage or obstruction in the way to God realization. Man's salvation lies in freeing his personality from the narrow limitation of selfhood. Man's aham makes him self-centred and all his activities directed to the satisfaction of his own self. His finite nature only is revealed then. But when he rises above his ego, his narrow self is not perished. Thus when man's personality is freed from narrow limitation of selfhood it attains infinity as he gives up the finiteness in his nature. For Tagore, salvation is not in the renunciation of the world, but in perfecting human personality. When we realise divinity in us, we get salvation within this earthly frame. When it realises communion with God then worldly existence is no bondage for him, for salvation is "the eternal bond of union between the Infinite souls from which there can be no mukti, because love is ultimate."

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