

## Tagore's Poetry: Ballad of Humanism

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**H**ISTORY occasionally witnesses the birth of some sparkling personalities that burn ablaze all ugliness, all pettiness, all inhuman vulgarities and thereby lead civilization to reach a dizzy height. Such personalities cannot be confined within the narrow geographical boundaries where they first touched the terrestrial earth. By dint of their vision, mission and action they expose themselves as Universal Man holding high up the banner of human values—truth, love, beauty, forbearance, harmony and eternal search for the ultimate destination from here to eternity. In such a galaxy of the prophets of humanism, Rabindranath Tagore, the minstrel of Mother India, occupies a frontal position.

Tagore is a myriad dimensional personality. He is a great poet and lyricist as well as a prose writer, a dramatist, a painter, a performer, a social reformer, an educationist and what not. But the undertone of all his creations and activities is love for Man. He is a passionate Indian, but his nationalism transcends into universalism, where one may find out a unique blending of the best of the East and that of the West. This paper is an humble attempt to get a glimpse of Tagore's philosophy of humanism. If the epithet 'poetic' refers to a synthesis of truth, beauty, harmony and music, perhaps all his literary creations can claim the epithet. In the present paper, however, for obvious reason, only his poems and lyrics will be cited for discussion.

On May 7, 1861, Rabindranath was born in an aristocratic, affluent and cultured family of Tagores at Jorasanko in Kolkata. This was the time when India, particularly Bengal was passing through a total cultural revolution known as the Renaissance. It opened the doors which had been closed for centuries. It was to search and cultivate new ideas, new thoughts and new approaches touching almost every aspect that makes human life beautiful and worth living.

Jorasanko Thakurbari (Tagore's House) was the hub of such cultural rejuvenation that fostered the basic values of rationalism, nationalism and humanism. Rabindranath from his very childhood because of both

heredity and environment imbibed these values and inculcated them through his lifelong creations.

Under the influence of his ascetic father Maharshi Debendranth, Rabindranath grew up in an atmosphere which was charged with the teachings of Vedanta and Upanisads. In his later years he was deeply impressed with the teachings of Vaisnavism, and also that of the saints of Mediavel Bhakti cult of India like Kabir, Rabidas, Dadu, Nanak and others. Sufi saints also enchanted him. As such the very fragrance of these philosophies that uphold the hankering for love, beauty, truth, peace, harmony as the process in the incessant search of the ultimate, forms the quintessence of Tagore's philosophy of humanism.

Tagore started writing at the age of thirteen and the next sixty seven years were marked by ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity in manifold forms. At the beginning of his literary career Tagore is a romantic and to some extent a mystic poet. He is a worshipper of beauty. So anything that is beautiful in nature, the young poet feels vibration of his own self in it. His heart dances like a peacock with the changing seasons, his eyes wake up from dreams with the flowing of the cascade, when spring comes gladdening the earth after sluggish winter, the poet reels in joy. He is so happy in the midst of nature's beauty that he writes:

This world is beautiful,  
I have taken up into my heart  
The sweetened dust of the earth.  
This is the message of successful life.

The poet at this stage is a frenzied lover. Initially his love is more or less earthly. In his series of lyrics entitled Prema (Love) and in innumerable poems his passionate love and hankering for his beloved have been beautifully painted. Only two examples are cited:

We two will float in the full-tide of love. So be free from all bindings.

The period of separation has been spent with pangs only with a day-dream.

At last, all roads are in union in your two eyes.

But soon such passionate material love transcends ethereal. It is not to be understood as an euphoria, neither it carries any biological connotation. The poet himself defines love in his own way.

O what is this !  
 Mysterious and uncapturable Bliss  
 That I have known and yet seems to be  
 Simple as breathe and easy as a smile  
 And older than the earth.

Now the poet's love is qualitatively different; it is more sublime. It is the stage where the poet is in search of a true relationship between the finite and the Infinite. In his desire to touch the Desired, he feels the pangs of separation. It is to note that at this stage the desirous and the Desired are conceived as two separate entities. So the poet murmurs:

I, the Man, am wandering alone in the  
 Big universe, amidst vast endless sky  
 Through Eternal time.  
 Thou the father of the world  
 Sitting all alone speechless and confined within  
 Thy Divine abode of majestic glory  
 and endless mystery

In the second stage, this feeling of separateness pains the poet and the poet passes through obsession that only endless sufferings could lead to salvation. In Sandhyasangeet he writes:

Sufferings, come to me, come to me  
 This heart is entirely lonely

So he clamours:

O Lord! Give me more pain  
 And make me more conscious  
 Break the door, overcome all obstacles  
 And save me, O my Lord!

Gradually the poet realizes that only by submerging the identity of the self into collectivity he can come nearer to his Desired. He is convinced that there is an organic relationship between finite and Infinite. Complete self-annihilation, self-effacement and negation of self-consciousness can lead to a complete union between the two. Love is the string that bonds. At this stage were composed unparalleled poems and lyrics of Gitanjali, Gitimalya, Gitali, Utsarga, Naivedya and similar other series

of poems.

The changed Tagore promises:

I'll not deceive you by my beauty,  
But only through love.  
I'm not to open the door by hand  
But only by singing.

This brings complete dependence where he murmurs:

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

Then comes total surrender with a craze for reaching the goal of salvation where says the poet:

I shall have to give you my all  
I know—  
All my treasures  
All my thoughts

Similarly the poet prays:

Let me lie down upon the ground  
Beneath your footstool in perfect gladness  
Let my garment be red with the common  
Dust you touched with your feet.

But the coveted salvation is not the renunciation of the world. His freedom is to be traced in earthly bondage with delight. In Naivedya, he writes:

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

This freedom leads to a total whole that is Infinite, which is the consolidation of the best in the finites. So this Infinite is Satyam (Truth), Shivam (Goodness), Sundaram (Beauty) and therefore Anandaswarupam (Happiness). A conglomeration of all such qualities brings perfect

harmony, and this is Absolute. This perfect freedom is the key that leads Man from the state of finiteness to identify with the Infinite. He says:

Within the finites, you the Infinite  
 play your own tune.  
 Your expression in me therefore  
 is so sweet.

This eternal searching for this perfect freedom is an essential component of humanity. This dimension adds a special aroma to Tagore's philosophy of harmony and humanism.

At this stage there is a significant and qualitative change in his poetic exuberance. Now the poet identifies himself as one among his fellows. Severing his romanticism and mysticism the poet now embraces tangibility of real life and real world. So he writes!

Come my friend, who can free me from bonds of toil.  
 .....  
 Come from among the crowd,  
 You, to whom I fully belong,  
 Who can call me by my own true name.

The poet aspires complete assimilation with masses as he writes:

Let my name be known  
 That I am a man of yours.

Manasi, Sonar Tori, Chitra—all these poem-series are the product of this spirit. He explains his mood:

How my heart opens today!  
 Here the world comes and embraces.

Now for the first time the poet realizes that he has some commitment to his fellow beings. He gives the clarion call:

O poet! Come up—if you have life  
 Come along with it and offer  
 That to day.

The poet now can feel the pulse of the down-trodden people and finds

out his Jeevan Devta (Director of life) in them. In his Chandalika dance drama (story of the daughter of an untouchable), in his poem Dhulamandir (The Temple of Dust), in Shuchi (Pure) and in similar other pieces the poet offers ovation to the toiling and marginalized people. So says he:

Whom are you worshipping quietly?  
 Open your eyes and see  
 Your god is not there.  
 He is where the farmer is tilling the earth.  
 He is where stones are being hewn  
 To make a path.

.....  
 Where will you get freedom?  
 The lord himself is bound  
 With all that he has created.

The poet condemns the social system and warns for its hateful attitude to the marginalized section:

By preventing the touch of Man  
 You have hated the God of man's heart  
 For anguished rage of the Creator, on the door of famine  
 You shall have to take food and drink sharing with others  
 .....  
 Whom you have pushed downward, will bind you down  
 Whom you have left behind, will draw you back.

The poet conveys his thanks to his Lord that his lot lies with the humble who suffer and bear the burden of power and hide their faces and stifle their sobs in the dark.

Poet's identification with common people and his sympathy for the oppressed and enslaved makes him concerned for the other half of the human society—the women. In his heart of hearts the poet strongly believes that without fullest development of women's personality and potentiality, full fledged advancement of the society is not possible. Hence harmony becomes missing in social system. In his Chitrangada (dance drama) and Raktakarabi (drama) the power, spirit and assertiveness of eternal womanhood have been beautifully illustrated. In his poem Sabala, the woman questions:

Why deprive me, my Fate,  
Of woman's right  
Boldly to conquer the best of life's prizes?

Thus as a stalwart of Bengal Renaissance, Tagore gives highest place to Man even higher than the God. To him Man is the creator of the Creator. So says he:

Being coloured with my awareness  
The emerald becomes green,  
The ruby becomes red.  
I opened my eyes to the sky  
Lighted up East and West  
I looked at the rose and said 'beautiful'  
It becomes beautiful.

What can be a better tribute to Man! What can be a more glorification of humanity!

As a protagonist of human freedom all through he is a seeker of peace because he believes that violence slays human soul. Whenever and wherever there is any episode of tyranny, oppression, show of brute force and exploitation of human values, he lifts up his pen as a sword and protests vehemently. Contemporary inhuman brutality of two world wars, arrogance and exploitative countenance of uneven capitalist development, aggression by the Nazis and the Fascists, molestation of democracy in Spain, attack on Manchuria by Japan—all perturbed the calm and serene spirit of the composer of Gitanjali. In utter disgrace he sighs:

The poisonous breath of the serpents  
Is spreading all around.

Despite his very delicate poetic approach it is widely known that Tagore became extremely vocal against stampede of humanism in the two wars and signed the Charter of World Peace along with Einstein and Romain Rolland and similar other stalwarts.

He was also opposed to all types of machine-made civilization which destroys the natural surroundings for human being and which is the bedrock of exploitative capitalism. In the face of utter crisis of civilization his dramatic creations like Mukta-Dhara (Free Flow) and Rak-takarabi (Red Oleanders) express his utter frustration when he writes:

The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,  
 The conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish  
 Crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.

Protesting against British brutality at Jalianwala Bagh he denounced Knighthood. His protest against imperialism is not confined within the boundaries of his motherland. Addressing colonially oppressed Africa, he pronounces in utter pain:

The savage greed of the civilized stripped  
 naked its unashamed inhumanity.  
 You wept and your cry was smothered,  
 Your forest trails become muddy with tears and blood.

In utter wrath he questions his Lord:

Those who are poisoning your air  
 and putting off your light  
 Have you pardoned them and loved?

Finally in search of peace he takes refuge to Lord Buddha and says:

Let thy great awakening under the bodhi tree be fulfilled  
 .....  
 Let through innumerable voices,  
 the gospel of immeasurable love announce thy call.

This protesting spirit against oppression and injustice that humiliate humanity have added an excellent dimension to Tagore's humanism.

Rabindranath, no doubt, is a poet, a philosopher. But his innate love for Man impels him to be an Indian also. He is proud of being so:

Blessed am I that I am born  
 to this land and that I had the luck to love her.

Despite his romantic view towards nature and a mystic-transcendental approach towards life, his sensitive nationalist soul bleeds profusely by the pinch of hatred, humiliation and exploitation by the colonizers. Hence comes out an incessant flow of poems and lyrics from his untiring pen. As a socially responsible member of the milieu Tagore associat-



ed himself with the active politics of Bengal and supported constructive Swadeshi movement of Gandhiji. Without going into details of this point this much I want to mention that to him life in the East is flowing like a feeble rivulet,... It has grace, softness and forbearance. To feel the 'life-process' that is continuing in India what are necessary are tolerance, reassertion, rehabilitation, reorganization and revivification of India's own cultural heritage and traditional ethos which will lead India to be a land—

Where the mind is without fear  
And the head is held high  
And where knowledge is free.  
Where the world has not been broken up into  
fragments by narrow domestic walls.

But such passionate Indianism could not confine Tagore into the limited purview of narrow nationalism. He was an Indian by birth but a world citizen by his perception. His goal is to channellise the streams of nationalism to the direction of supranationalism or universalism by freeing human soul from all bondage and pettiness and thereby transcending itself into a search for universal love and brotherhood. India's motto, Tagore reminds us, is Unity in Diversity. So India in Tagore's vision is the pilgrimage of world humanity as it is the great synthesizer and unifier in the midst of manifold differences through centuries. To him India is a place where:

The Aryans, the non-Aryans, the Dravida and China  
Sakas, Hunas, Pathans and Mughals  
All are merged in one body.  
The West has now opened the door and bringing gifts;  
All are to deliver and accept and mingle  
And no one is to recede.

This is how Tagore's passionate search to rediscover his country through her own heritage yet identifying her with the underlying unity with humanity as a whole besmeared Tagore's philosophy of humanism with the tranquil touch of internationalism.

When the present world is under constant threat of fragmentalism in the face of narrow sectarianism, regionalism, communalism and linguistic snobbery, where peace is dwindled up under the paw of greedy consumerism arising out of negative dimension of globalization, where

harmony is under the constant threat of unplanned aggressive technology, Tagore's poetry with its beauty and lustre consoles us and gives the mantra:

You demean yourself  
 If you dither.  
 Let not imaginary troubles  
 Dishearten you.

In the long uphill journey in human life if no one shows the light even on a stormy night of thunder and lightening, Tagore is our pathfinder. His poetry with its message of world peace, harmony and humanism is an eternal light-house to mankind.

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