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Rabindranath Tagore's Concept of Harmony between the Infinite and the Finite

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Abstract

To live the life of Rabindranath Tagore is truly an achievement. To him the universe was a harmony, music was the mother tongue of the soul, art was the expression of the infinite or divine in man. In developing the idea of 'the divinity of man' and the 'humanity of God,' Tagore, like a true philosopher, tried to evaluate the proper relation between man and God. God as the absolute ideal is manifested through human life in a perfect form and becomes human and man, and thus, a relation between man and God is finally established. Tagore explains the nature of this relationship as the union of the infinite with the finite in finiteness. According to him, humanity and divinity are inseparable; they are like two sides of the same coin. Through the medium of his lyrics, Tagore attempts to awaken the element of divinity that lie inactive in man; transform man from the partial to the complete, from the less perfect to the more perfect. The present study is an attempt to reveal Tagore's concept of humanism rooted in the ideal Supreme Man and to stimulate the readers to cultivate and foster unity and co-operation of all people irrespective of cast, creed or religion.

Keywords: Divinity, Humanity, Union with the beyond, Love for God, Love for man.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is a great believer in God. Without God his poetry will look very shallow, although there would be critics to regard him as a great poet of love and nature. From God to man and from man to God is a frequent transition we witness in his poetry. He fuses nature and God. Several times he looks at God as Gopi will look at Madhav. At various occasions he emphasizes the Radha - Krishna relationship.

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Tagore's God is not the 'ultimate' of Dante nor the Upanisadic 'essence' in which we must lose our identity. Others may indulge in the controversy about God's existence but Tagore knows that He exists. Tagore's love for God includes love for everything He has created. In *The Religion and Man* Tagore speaks about the Supreme love whose touch we experience in all our relation of love: the love of nature's beauty, of the animal, the child, the comrade, the beloved, the love that illuminates our consciousness of reality. Love makes us immortal and deathless. "When do you find the touch of immortality in things mortal?" Tagore asks, "When there is love, it is love that casts the shadow of the infinite and keeps the old perpetually young and does not acknowledge death?" (Shantiniketan)

Tagore's concept of religion is very much fascinating to study. To facilitate my research on Tagore's God-concept, I would like to divide the eighty years of his life into five equal periods: the early years, youth and early adulthood, the Gitanjali period, period of mature reflection and the final years. Each part takes a detailed look at Tagore's relationship with God.

The Yearly Years

In the early years of his life, Rabindranath, consciously and unconsciously learned much from his father. The strength of character, dedication to ideals and religious devotedness that Debendranath (his father) learned from Rammohun Roy were in turn imbibed by Rabindranath. The father's piety, honesty, love of nature and sense of beauty, made a great impression on Rabindranath because his father always remained a kind of ideal and model for the young Rabi. Perhaps, Rabindranath's ability to give his best to a variety of activities and initiatives was inherited from his father, who with all the demands of being the patriarch of a large joint family, was active also in the management of vast estates and paid off all debts and was scrupulous in his obligations. What planted Tagore's feet firmly on the earth was his father's religiosity.

Even in his early years, Rabindranath was an indefatigable God-seeker. His childhood and early boyhood days at home was a life within walls- walls of concrete as well as walls raised by socio-religious dos and don'ts. The child felt that beyond these walls there lay a world, rich in possibilities that was being denied to him. This 'beyond' created in him a deep sense of mystery and aroused in him an earnest desire to get in touch with it. He wanted to reach out to that 'beyond,' discover its secrets and make it his own.

Tagore's search for the 'beyond' began as a search for the 'outside,' the world beyond the imprisoning walls of his childhood days. Though he is allowed the freedom of wandering freely in the world of nature, he was not satisfied with the knowledge of the 'beyond' that he had conquered. His yearning for the 'beyond' took the shape of the yearning for human love and then more specifically for feminine love and companionship. The ideal of love that appealed to him

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was half human, half divine, and to some extent he realized it in the person of Kadambari Devi. He thought he had attained the ‘beyond’ of his dreams, but the ‘beyond’ in some way, escaped his grasp and remained unrealized. There was still the persistent emptiness in his heart and he did not know where to turn, or to whom to go, to fill that void. The ‘beyond’ he is seeking is ‘someone’ to centre his life and love on, someone who can fill the emptiness of his heart.

We find in his poems a movement from nature to human love and then to an ideal higher than the human and then disappointed, return to the human. The condition of his mind can be best described by a phrase from one of the essays he wrote while in Ahmedabad: “our mind is a bundle of hungers.” His mind was indeed ‘a bundle of hungers- hunger for understanding and love, hunger for recognition and fame, hunger to become someone respected and thus regain the esteem of his elders who had given up all hopes in him, and above all, hunger for that ‘someone’ that ‘dear one’ who could actually fill the emptiness in his heart.

This hunger for God is clearly expressed in a poem called *Abhilasa* (yearning). This is a prayer addressed to God:

Oh! God, why did you place me in the midst of pomp and splendour,
Where everyone’s heart is like a machine,
Where love and devotion and every faculty,
Is governed by harsh and merciless laws?
The show of heartless grace, the cruel laws of artificial civility,
The affected smile of gentleness is not for me.

He wrote the above lines in the context of the anger and pain he experienced at being pressurized by insults and appeals to submit to formal education. He had to suffer the ridicule and scoffing of his relatives because he would not let himself be cast into their mould of greatness and respectability. In the same poem he expresses his longing for a life free from heartless contempt, false accusation and antipathy. He thinks, if instead of having been born in an aristocratic family, he was to have been born in a farm house, he would have been able to satisfy the natural longing of his heart.

Youth and Yearly Adulthood

The state of emptiness that Tagore experienced in his late teens continued through the time he spent in England and for at least three years after his return. The emptiness in his heart persisted right up to 1882; restless and confused, his mind and heart continued to wander in search of someone who could fill the voidness of his heart. The feeling of desolation continued

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even in his early adulthood; he felt alone, lost, and enveloped by darkness. In such a state of mind he seeks consolation in talking to his ‘beloved’ that is, the image of the ideal beloved that he nurtures in his heart. He keeps on searching, keeps on longing, not knowing what he himself wants. The yearning for the beloved finds clear expression in a ballad composed during this period, *Apsarar Prem* (The Love of Apsara).

Come O beloved, come,
Endless this waiting, waiting by the window,
Sitting alone, ever hoping,
Feeble in body, never a wink of sleep,
I await your coming, gazing at the road....
A waiting that knows not day or night.

With the publication of the collection of poems *Prabhat Sangit*(Morning Songs) Tagore’s state of bewilderment has passed. The night has gone and the new day has dawned. Here the poet rediscovers life with a wider dimension. The morbid introspection is not there anymore. The first of these poems, *The Awakening of the Waterfall* written on the very day of his extraordinary spiritual experience, celebrates this newness that is an all-pervading light and power. He wrote:

After a long time, a light has entered the dark cave...
I do not know why after so long my heart has been awakened...
I am suddenly able to see this world in a new light.
... I don’t know how, but heart today has woken up.
Where I can find so much happiness, such beauty,
so much play!
I experience great joy, my heart is full.

It is evident from the above lines, that the state of bewilderment has been overcome. Something of the ‘beloved’ he knows, be it indistinctly, as his life has been blessed by brief encounters.

The best way to describe who is God for Rabindranath Tagore is to examine the different names he used for God in this period. In a letter written in 1891, he addressed God in the following way: “Oh You the Indescribable One!” In another song, in the course of trying to describe the way he understands God, Tagore says: “He is beyond description.” *Vidhata* is the name most often used by him. At least fifteen times we find it in his poems, letters and other writings of this time. The word means providence, director and the one who ordains and make things happen. It is also obvious from two of his letters: one written on 23 January 1890 and the

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other on 7 February 1893 that for Tagore God is the Creator. In the former he wrote, “Among all the qualities with which God the Creator of the universe adorned the human person, meekness is pre-eminent.” And in the latter, he speaks of God as “the Creator, alone in the midst of his Creation.”

An often-repeated name for God that we find in Tagore’s writings in these years is *Pita*(Father). They reflect a special, very close relationship of God to the heart of man. I wish to quote a few examples from his *poems and songs*:

“You... are our Father” (*Tumi... go pita amader*); “call out to all and say, let us go to the Father’s house” (*Bolore deke bolo, pita ghare calo*); “All are crying distressfully, listen O Father, listen” (*Sokatore oi kandieche sokole, suno, suno, pita*); I have come in fear, O Father... turn to me and see there is no strength in my heart” (*Sobhoye esechi Pita... ceye dokho hridayete nahi bal*)

According to Rabindranath Tagore, God’s most preferred dwelling place is the heart of man. The heart of man as Tagore sees it, belongs to God and therefore it is His rightful dwelling place. Everyone else who has found entry and enthroned himself therein is a usurper. Therefore, Rabindranath says in one of his songs, - “Cast out everyone else and make Him your Lord.” (Chunkapura 2002) Tagore is of the view that the relationship between God and man is created by God himself. In his poem *Anugraha* (Blessing), Tagore says, “Least of the least, you have created me,” Again in a hymn composed for the Brahma Samaj worship he writes, “I know this that because You are, I also am, You are living and so I too am alive.” In another hymn Tagore sings, “I am here, only because of your great love.” This indeed is the basis of all relationship of man to God, that man has being because God is Being. Man owes every bit of his life to God because it is God who created him and it is He who continues to sustain his life.

From the early years of his life to the end of this period (early adulthood), Rabindranath has made some progress in his search for God. Although, the end of the early period was characterized by a state of bewilderment; gradually it all passed away, and Tagore’s search for the ‘beyond’ began to take a precise shape. He moved from a mere ‘something’ to a ‘someone’ to centre his life and love on; someone who could fill the emptiness of his heart. His attitude towards life is more positive and hopeful. This is clearly shown in a song of January 1881, a hymn addressed to God at the Brahma Samaj prayer meetings:

You alone I’ve made my life’s pole-star,
Never again to lose my way in this ocean.

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May you always shine wherever I be!
Your light is the balm of my eyes.

The Gitanjali Period

In the second phase Tagore, the seeker, moved from a state of bewilderment to a clearer grasp of the object of his seeking, and from a state of restlessness to a certain degree of peace and tranquility. However, his ardent desire is for a constant presence and a total union exists. In the third phase, (The Gitanjali period) the poet is able to enter more deeply into the mystery of the divine and arrive at a more personal and profound understanding of that reality. The presence of his 'beloved' becomes more constant and he enjoys a greater degree of union. He is able to bridge the gap between himself and the 'beyond.'

The writings of this period are powerful expression of images which illustrates his hearts deep yearning for God. Tagore's favourite image is 'waiting at God's door.' For example:

I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands. That is why it is so late and why I have been guilty of such omissions.

They come with their laws and their codes to bind me fast; but I evade them ever, for I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands.(Gitanjali 17)

Some of the expressions that Tagore uses in his poems and songs convey the idea of the depth and passion of his heart's longing and of the earnestness with which he seeks God.

Tagore used diverse names to address God in *Gitanjali*. Some of them are: Thou (1), My Master (15), Our Master (11), My Father (35), My Lord (36), My God (102), My Poet (65), Master Poet (7), My Sun Ever Glorious (80), My King (39), My Friend (23), Love (17), Life of my Life (4), The Lord of my life, Lord of all worlds (76), My Only Friend, My Best Beloved, the solitary Wayfarer (22), My Lover (41), My Darling (57), My Lord of Silence (39), Lord of my Heart (52), Lord of all worlds (76), King of all Kings (56), The King of our Dark Dreary House, The King of the fearful Night (51), Thou Holy One, Thou Wakeful (39), Thou Spotless and Serene (68), The Innermost One (72). Additionally, some of the descriptive names that he used in this period are: "Thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind" (4), "He who can bear all burdens" (9), "The friend on his journey of love" (23), "A thirsty traveler who comes to drink at the village well" (54), "The Inscrutable without name and form" (95), and "He who is formless, he who is beyond touch" (96).

Tagore's use of rich variety of names to describe God, portray his qualities, attitudes and closeness with God. No one name or set of names satisfies him. Each new name sheds fresh light

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on Rabindranath's understanding of God. The wide variety of names bears witness to two things: firstly, his fervent love for God that never tires of probing the mystery of the object of that love; and secondly, the realization that the Ultimate Reality can never be fully contained in or demonstrated exhaustively by finite words and formulas. The names and descriptions are an account of the delight of discovery and the jubilation of knowing and loving Him.

In many of his poems and songs, Tagore addresses God as 'You / Thou' (*Tumi*). This is not because of the inability to find other names for God; rather, it is a clear expression of the very personal relationship that he enjoys with his God. The use of the word 'You' divulges a certain affinity with God. In the second song of the English *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath himself confesses such a relationship. He says, "Drunk with the joy of singing, I forget myself and call Thee friend who art my Lord."

Tagore always desired that man should submit himself to God in every eventuality. In a letter to his niece, Rabindranath wrote, "You will be deluding yourself terribly, if at least for a moment during the day or night you do not surrender yourself to God, if in all your moments you turn only to yourself." He strongly feels that man should not always be at the receiving end, instead he too must give to God his gift of love. This idea is beautifully illustrated in song 50 of *Gitanjali*:

When thy golden chariot appeared in the distance...
My hopes rose high... the chariot stopped where I stood. Thy glance fell on me
and thou camest down with a smile. I felt that the luck of my life had come at last.
Then of a sudden thou didst hold out thy right hand and say, 'what hast thou to
give to me'? Ah, what a kingly jest was to open thy palm to a beggar to beg.

Rabindranath's longing for God was not just to find Him, but to be united with him forever. During the *Gitanjali* period, he has been able to attain a deeper, personal and profound relationship with his God. The songs of *Gitanjali* and the many endearing names he used in this period, confirms his deeper relations with God. Although, Rabindranath made tremendous progress in exploring his Beloved, his longing for a permanent union still persists. He is yet to achieve an element of *paoa* (getting) and at the same time the element of *caoa* (waiting/longing). That is to say, the longing is realized and yet not realized. In one of his poems, he says to God that he will no longer sit and wait for his beloved to come, rather he would set out in search of Him in unwavering hope:

This is my delight, thus to wait and watch at the wayside...

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From dawn till dusk, I sit here before my door I know that of a sudden the happy moment will arrive when I shall see. (*Gitanjali* 44)

Years of Mature Reflection

In the fourth phase, Tagore enters into an intimate relationship with God. Most often he refers to God as a 'person.' The Supreme Person, the Immortal Person, the Infinite Personality and the Self of Self are a few examples. Apart from other names, the two most frequently used names to describe God are: 'Supreme' and 'Infinite.' He calls God the Supreme One, the Supreme Person, the Supreme Soul, the Supreme Lover, the Supreme God, the Supreme Truth, the Supreme Lord of Time, the Supreme Spirit of Perfection, and the Infinite, the Infinite Personality, the Infinite Soul, the Infinite joy, the Infinite Love.

Love, truth, unity and goodness are not referred to as mere qualities of God. For Tagore, God is the Love, the Truth, the One, the Good and the All. He is confident that there is only one God and no other. He describes God as the One, the Eternal Spirit, the One God revealed to all human races. The best way to know God is to understand Him fully as possible, through the free surrender of love. Love and action are the two intermediaries through which perfect knowledge can be obtained. This path of knowledge through love and action is a prolonged process, stretching over one's life span and further into eternity. However, man's knowledge of God will always remain limited and incomplete. He writes in the *Gardener*, "I cannot find what I seek, I cannot understand what I would learn."

Rabindranath's writings of this period shed a new light and grandeur on his understanding of the relationship between God and man. God is the creator of man and everything in this universe and in man's life is God's gift to him. The numerous names used for God: Father, Friend, Companion, Beloved, and Sweetheart, speak of a great familiarity and even intimacy between man and God. In his writings it is repeated mention that God is the Creator, the Infinite, the Supreme, while man is the creature, finite and always dependent on God for his very existence.

In this period, Tagore tries to answer the question as to what is man's role in realizing his union with God? "God wants man to add his own string to the numerous strings in God's lute, to place his own little lamp amidst God's numberless stars." (*Lover's Gift and Crossing*) Our life here on earth is a call to collaborate with God in his creative activity in the freedom of spirit, and spontaneity of love. This world is "God's love taking form" and man is called to "help it with his own love." (*Stray Birds* 325) God expects much more from man than what he expects from other creatures. Man's response to God's love should be more creative, it should be the fruit of hard

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work and sacrifice. In Tagore's opinion, not only does man need God, but God also needs man. In many of his writings in this period, Tagore voices the conviction. For example:

God loves man's lamp-lights better than
his own great stars. (*Stray Birds*312)
God waits to win back his own flowers as gifts
from man's hands (*Stray Birds* 315)

Towards the end of this period, Rabindranath understands that the fame and glory that he had gained at the international level after winning the Nobel Prize, made him consider himself great. He admits to God the weakness of having sought his own glory and not that of his Lord. He says, "My Lord... even when I bring you my songs for an offering, I have the secret hope that men will come and love me for them" (*Fruit Gathering* 213). Further, he promises God, "from today all my works will be for your glory." He was convinced that worldly fame and glory could not satisfy his heart or give it the peace and the security that he was looking for. He confesses, "I have scaled the peak and found no shelter in fame's bleak and barren height." (*Stray Birds*328)

Furthermore, Tagore feels that the time is short and he has reached the evening of his life; the time is running out for him, and that he has much to do yet to gain the object of his longing. In many of his poems we find expressions like "for the time flies to its end" and praying to God, "Lead me, my Guide, before the light fades into the valley of quiet" (*Stray Birds*, 328). The only aim of Tagore now is to keep his beloved bound for ever, and then his heart would be contented. Even though the darkness persists, the path is unknown, and that the total union with the beloved still seems a distant and an impossible reality; yet it does not disappoint him. Rabindranath says that although he is restless, he is still unperturbed and sure that one day he will be able to know and experience fully the 'life' and 'joy' that up to now he has had only 'in glimpses' (*Fruit Gathering*, 185).

Final Years

In the last fourteen years of his life (final years), Rabindranath wrote and spoke more than ever on humanism. The common theme that pervades most of his writings of this period is 'man' and the emphasis is on humanism and related subjects. Due to this emphasis on man and humanism, some were of the opinion that Rabindranath lost faith in God and therefore became a secular humanist. At a symposium, held in Kolkata in 1987, on Rabindranath Tagore, some

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eminent professors and Tagore scholars expressed their idea that he was frustrated with God in the final years of his life and therefore he turned towards man in most of his writings.

It is to be noted here that, Tagore turned to humanism not because of his frustration with God, rather his attempt was to reveal the divine in man. The perfect way to understand Tagore's humanism is to examine what he calls *The Religion of Man*, because it is in this that Tagore illustrates in detail his understanding of man and humanism. It deals with the transformation from the partial to the complete, from the less perfect to the more perfect. It includes all man's activities and endeavors, both material and spiritual that enable man to transcend the realm of freedom, creativity, and love. *The Religion of Man* is the sum total of the efforts of mankind as a whole and thus revealing the divine in man.

Rabindranath describes the greatness of human relationships in one of his letters he wrote from Russia. According to him love and goodness are expressions of being truly human. Goodness represents the detachment of our spirit from the exclusiveness of our egoism. He writes, "Man finds his own larger and truer self in his wide human relationship, ... in his ideal of unity, he realizes the eternal in his life and the boundless in his love; ... the consciousness of this unity is spiritual and our effort to be true to it is our religion." (Chunakapura 2002). To reach this sense of perfection man should abandon the individual self. This abandoning according to Tagore is not in the negation of self, but the dedication of it. Man should reveal the Eternal in him in the varied manifestations of truth, goodness and beauty. The individual man must exist for Man the Great, and must express him in disinterested works, in service and worship. Man must represent Man the Eternal in all his creative works.

Rabindranath had to go through a lot of pain both physical and mental, during the final years caused by a variety of circumstances: personal, social, religious and political; yet, he was not exasperated with God. He wrote in a letter: "I know how many times I had to bear extreme pain. But that has been my good fortune." (Chunakapura 2002) All the pain and negative experiences that came to him in life did not lead Tagore to discouragement or frustration. In this regard, the following words of Rabindranath's biographer is very significant: "... from each great sorrow, he had emerged more chastened in spirit and firmer in his faith." (Kripalini 1980) Rabindranath's understanding of God during the closing years of his life is reflected in the names he uses for God. They express the same understanding of the nature and attributes of God and of the relationship between God and man, and God and the universe, as in the Gitanjali period and in the years of mature reflection. The name *Vidhata* is used at least twenty-five times in this period. It is a name which was used by Tagore even in his early writings. Thus, it is evident that

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in spite of Rabindranath's concentration on man and humanism during these years, his understanding of God had not undergone any substantial change. God for Tagore, continued to be the Creator, Protector, Lord, Master, Judge and Friend. God is Light and Truth and he is not only the Source of Life and Love, but also the King of Death and the Perfect end of all that is.

Conclusion

Tagore's preoccupation in all his life's seeking has been to open his life to Truth, and the path which he had to travel to achieve it, was not very easy. He was basically a man of faith; his faith was brave and true, for it had been tested on the fire of suffering. His faith did not rest on the artificial props of borrowed beliefs but was founded in the experience of sorrow. What strengthened Tagore even in pain and failure is his great confidence in the love of his Beloved. He confessed his faith and love in significantly strong words: "Let this be my last words that I trust in Thy love." (*Stray Birds* 329) However, his sufferings did not lead him to lose faith in God. Right to the very last, Rabindranath brought to his God the love and homage of his poems and songs.

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