



## **Development of Rabindranath Tagore's Concept of Evil- A Philosophical Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Evil is unwelcomed, discouraging and unsafe. The human beings face various types of evil in their lives e.g. Sickness, Death and physical Problems. The evil includes poverty, Misery failure, mental agony, death of near and dear ones. But why evil exists in this World? Tagore tried to provide a better solution. He asked why the peace does not triumph at a place which is free from evil. Why the entire world suffers from the suffering caused by the evil? This is due to the inseparability of human beings.

**Key Words:** Death, Evil, Misery, Mental Agony, Religion

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The greatness of Tagore probably needs no introduction. He is still considered as an unparalleled and in spite of the long years since he died, his poems and other literary works are still most vividly present in our memory. In most cases the poets have a philosophical insight and Tagore was not an exception. In his different literary and poetical works we find glimpses of his idea on evil. The paper is an attempt to present his idea on evil

Tagore's concept of religion and attempted to define the nature of his religious consciousness. This development appears as an essential precondition to penetrate on his philosophical reflections on evil, which has been the objective of the current chapter. Already it has been observed that Tagore has no fixed or rigid view about his religion, nor is it delimited by the conventional periphery of any scripture. His mind acquires the 'freedom from the dominance of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some scripture, or in the teaching of some organized body of worshippers.' He names his religion as 'The Poet's religion'. It is ultimately a process of forming of his inner being. It seems that the poet's aesthetic religion has reaped diverse components from the vast resources of the world of ideas and integrated them within his inner self (referred as 'personality' in Tagore's terminology). At the end it emerges out as a personal religion, having a completely novel dimension contributed by his matchless creativity. Similarly, his view on evil has no customary representation in his works. Neither Tagore formulates any systematic arguments in favor of his view. As we have seen, a typical Western structure of the problem of evil demands a fixed, scripture-based monotheistic belief system which is totally absent in the world of the 'Poet's religion'. In 1913 Tagore delivered a series of lectures for the western academic world where an important essay named "Problem of Evil" contains the essence of his early philosophical thought on evil. The essay, from the beginning, sets the note of the discussion where Tagore says, "The question why there is evil in existence is the same as why there is imperfection, or, in other words, why there is creation at all". For Tagore, the existence of evil as multiple forms of sufferings in the world is an accepted fact, a hard fact that one cannot but has to acknowledge and endure. At the same time, he deviates from the particularly afterlife-oriented Indian inheritance when he refuses to conform to the conventional belief about the illusory (unreal) nature of this material world with the totality of its life forms ("Kaḍi O Komala", "Sonār Tarī" "Ātmaparichaya", "Pariśeṣa", "Śeṣlekhā" to mention a few). He says, "If existence were an evil, it would wait for no philosopher to prove it. It is like convicting a man of suicide, while all the time he stands before you in the flesh. Existence itself is here to prove that it cannot be an evil."<sup>3</sup> Here, we must discern the nature of the problem of evil formulated by Tagore, which from the beginning, deviates from the traditional form of representation. At the same time we also notice that Tagore's unorthodox proclamation of the serious problem does not deprive it of its utmost significance and weight in the field of philosophical discourse. The central contemplation on the problem of evil, for Tagore, consists of a search for an explanation of the existence of evil in moral sphere. The above reflection, as we shall explore, is intertwined with his continuous quest that leads to establish man as a unique creative being belonging to a stratum where the radical dichotomy of good and evil ultimately diminishes. Tagore's speculative mind identifies a continuous process of 'becoming' in the world, an evolution of cosmic consciousness, where everything is moving forward and aspiring for perfection. All imperfections in this ongoing course are counted as evil. Regarding the idea of 'imperfection', Tagore's original view comes at the forefront while he articulates, "... man being complex and always on the path of transcending himself, the meaning of the word 'perfection' cannot be crystallized into an inflexible idea."<sup>4</sup> We see that the 'real question' for Tagore is, 'Is this imperfection the final truth? Is evil absolute and ultimate? This utterance seems to bear extreme significance as it articulates Tagore's authentic standpoint concerning the problem of evil which dispels any dispute over his real concern with the enigma of evil. In the essay of Sādhana he reveals with the help of a few appropriate imageries, the actual significance of those obstacles amidst the uninterrupted stream of the world—"The towing rope binds a boat, but is the bondage its meaning? Does it not at the same time draw the boat forward?"<sup>6</sup> Those impediments bear a positive import in the

sense that they provide meaning to our journey of life. For this reason, 'bondage' cannot be the 'meaning' of the towing rope, as the rope, here a symbol for fetter, in reality leads to the progress of the boat. It should be noticed that, Tagore has no alliance with the standard belief that considers all obstacles and sufferings in human life are nothing but the repellent facts of life. That belief yields only negativity. For a commonplace believer, this long-established perspective inevitably insists for a suitable explanation for any kind of evil in a God-created world while the most perfect and omnipotent Creator has all the ability and will to abolish any negative element altogether. In the previous chapter we have already seen that Tagore cannot be categorized as a believer, subscribing to the ordinary mode of religious devotion. Naturally, his philosophical perception of negative facts would be different from the usual theological outlook and subsequently, he refuses to connect each and every manifestation of evil on earth to the whim and wrath of a divine designer. Tagore denies that it is the responsibility of our Creator to construct a world only for the gratification of our pleasure. Later, this study shall try to explore the often-discussed dispute whether Tagore retains his faith on a Divine Creator of the universe, as depicted by the religious scriptures, till the end of his philosophical journey. This propensity of the poet's mind seems to have a remote resemblance with the previously-discussed Irenian Theodicy where this earthly life is viewed as a place of 'soul-making'. But the similarity ends here because Tagore never regards man as an eternal sinner in a 'sin-laden' world, only striving for salvation under the protective shield of institutional Christianity.

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## TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF HUMAN FREEDOM

Dimension of Tagore's reflection on 'Man the offspring of Immortality' (amrtasya putra) becomes clear when he believes that, the purpose and the meaning of human life on earth are far more precious than only nurturing one's own blind and escapist desire for an entirely pain-free material life. For him, "the most important lesson that man can learn from his life is not that there is pain in this world, but that it depends upon him to turn it into good account, that it is the same note is found as he explains 'real freedom of man', which is "never in being saved in troubles, but it is the freedom to take trouble for his own good, to make the trouble an element in his joy." In a song of Gitabitān the poet prays, "Bipade more rakṣā karo e nahe mor prārthanā/ Bipade āmi nā jeno kori bhay" ("My prayer is not that you save me from all dangers, but that in all dangers I may stand out without fear", Eng. Tr. mine) Again one hears from him: "Duḥkha jadi nā pābe to duḥkha tomār ghuchbe kabe" ("when will your sufferings end if you do not suffer at all", Eng. Tr. mine) The concept of 'freedom from pain' (duḥkhamukti) acquires a novel aspect in Tagore's aesthetic philosophy. Whenever Tagore speaks of our inward journey from Falsity to Truth, from Darkness to Light, from Death to Immortality and ultimately from Hatred to Love, he insists that there is no way to proceed forward by avoiding pain and suffering altogether. This one and only route moves ahead through several phases of suffering, transcending our being to Bliss (Ananda) at the end. His drama "The King of the Dark Chamber" conveys that very idea and we must not forget the unique poem "The Child", where the pilgrims reach their destination through extreme agony, despair and death. Tagore conveys us an idea of a 'larger life' where "comes the conflict of our lesser man with our greater man, of our wishes with our will." He thinks "as we make progress we find that pain, disease, and poverty of power are not absolute, but that it is only the want of adjustment of our individual self to our universal self which gives rise to them." To comprehend the crux of Tagore's concept of evil, one must seek to decipher his integral vision of the moral nature of man that dwells deep within every being. This seems to be a pre-condition to grasp the full import of his concept of evil, because Tagore's vision of this particularly 'theological' issue definitively involves the domain of basic ethical notions. According to Tagore, "when a man begins to have an extended vision of his true self, when he realizes that he is much more than at present he seems to be, he begins to get conscious of his moral nature." From that moment of self realization an individual begins to demarcate between what is the object immediate desire (preya) and what is intrinsically good (śreya). "Good is that which is desirable for our greater self" because good is a connected view of the wholeness of our life. It is a life that is beyond the immediate present but a visionary can see and feel the impact of that unrealized future. Tagore emphasizes that, "our moral faculty is the faculty by which we know that life is not made up of fragments, purposeless and discontinuous." Here the relation of his ethics with his aesthetics comes to the forefront. The idea of 'relatedness' is one of the most important notions in his system of belief which signifies the key concept of 'harmony' (sāmanjasya).

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## MORAL EVIL AND MORAL HARMONY

In several literary works of Tagore we have found references of concrete incidents of his own life, which depict his experience of extreme agony and shock when he faces the fact of alienated existence, isolated from the wholeness of life. One significant incident is recorded in Jvansmṛti, where, in his childhood, Tagore gets a rude shock by noticing a single severed human hand in the floor of the medical college. It seemed to him that the truth of the wholeness of humanity is shattered by the single separated existence of the split part of human body. The continuous stream of existence is felt and known by that aspect of our integrated sense, called 'moral faculty' by Tagore. The same applies to his perception of this world as a harmonious whole. This moral faculty, as it is elaborated by Tagore, is obviously a split from any sectarian morality in the narrow sense. It is far beyond the access of any scriptural or tradition-based moral rules that are in vogue in human society. In Tagore's world of thought this moral faculty represents the core of humanity in man. It is, at the same time, inseparably related to the universal creative core, indicative of the element of harmony in our being. For the clarification of this fact one must lay emphasis on Tagore's point that "life is not made by fragments". Tagore feels that "all broken truths are evil. They hurt because they suggest something which they do not offer. ...life in a half-world is evil, because it feigns finality when it is obviously incomplete. Over and over again Tagore expands his thought on the universal aspect of human beings. He asserts that man's individuality (here applied in the sense of 'self-centric tendency') cannot be his highest truth. If he were made to live in a secluded world where his own acquisitive self was the only factor to consider, then that would be the worst prison imaginable to him. "Chitrā", one of his famous collection of early poems, contains the oft-quoted line "Swārtha magna jejon bimukh bṛhat jagat hote, se kakhono śekheni bānchite". Tagore recognizes that "In the life of self-seeking, the burden of pleasure and pain is very great," but for the man, "who dedicates his life for Truth, for the sake of his country and for the good of man,...finds that personal happiness and misery have changed their meaning for him." 19 In this realm of existence the person is aware of an intuition for his greater self which is far beyond the limits of

his material self along with his physical frame. With the above discussion on the novel dimension of human morality, one can link another important theme of Tagore's philosophy, that is, his view on universal law. His ideas on this theme are conspicuously revealed in his Śāntiniketan Lectures. These lectures hold a very special position in the domain of Tagore's philosophical thought. Apparently all of the lectures that are rendered in the weekly prayer of Santiniketan Mandir (Temple of prayer), are centred around the multi-dimensional Aupaṇṣadik concept of Brahma. Yet those lectures are amazingly able to pass beyond any conventional delimiters like religious texts. They bear the distinctive mark of a poet's keen sensitivity infused with deep emotional content and hence become a reliable source of his thought. The time-span of these lectures are less than a year (1907-8). The period is prior to the Gītānjali era. So they have a potent link with the lectures of Sādhanā. Those lectures expose Tagore's careful demarcation of the infallible natural order and the moral order of human society. Tagore insists that all the natural disasters, generally regarded as God-sent evil and sermonized as divine retribution for sin by the churchmen, should not be muddled up with moral evils which, belonging to a completely different level, are undeniably the factual source of all the sufferings of mankind, inflicted by their fellow inhabitants on earth. In the lecture "Ādes" (The Commandment) he almost lays blame on the sacred scriptures who have proclaimed various taboos as God's special injunctions. According to him, Such preaching produces the impression as if God whimsically prescribed some laws and, if these laws are transgressed, then we shall have to face the wrath of the cosmic monarch. This petty and unnatural view is unacceptable....He has proclaimed only one decree and it applies to the entire universe. That is the only commandment. He has said only this: Be revealed In the lecture "Vidhān" (Law) Tagore reveals the twofold aspect of Being by quoting from Upaniṣad: 'sā eva bandhurjanitā sā vidhātā'. The first portion of the śloka explains that: He, who has manifested me, is bound to be my friend. Again, sā vidhātā, the lawgiver is none else but 'He'. By the unbroken thread of this law, everything from the dust of this earth to the uncountable stars of the stellar region is strung together. System of this inevitable law is neither anyone's sole possession, nor is it bound by any particular time and space. Tagore, being enough sensitive to comprehend the universality of the cosmic law, never indulges the customary misconception of the common mind, long-established by the theologians and priests, that confuses every trivial episodes of man's daily life as instances of the totalitarian whim of Supreme Lord. The Upaniṣad declares that He who is the Lord of the Universe is ever and eternally regulating everything befittingly. At the same time He is manifested as a friend in our soul in the form of bliss- Tagore exclaims in his poetic dialect, "Mighty kingdoms and empires crumble to the dust, great storehouses of wealth lie like empty coconut shells... the form of loss is either full of gloom or fearful. It is emptier than emptiness for it is the disappearance of wholeness."

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