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Philosophising Tagore: Exploring Spirituality and Mysticism

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ABSTRACT:

Mysticism is a term related to spirituality. It is a collection of distinct practices, discourses, texts, traditions and experiences aimed towards human transformation. Mystic poetry holds an important position in the domain of world literature for its primary focus on internal rather than external realities. It focuses on the spirituality rather than materialistic world. Mysticism can be noted as a prominent feature of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. He was one of the pioneers of the Bengal renaissance and contributed towards combining traditional Indian culture with the western ideas. However, the mysticism Tagore writes about is quite different from the mysticism of that of the Indian saints. Tagore's concept of mysticism celebrates the love and desire for the union of nature and God. Tagore's collection of poetry named Gitanjali is an offering of songs to God. Tagore established himself as a famous writer in the United States and in England after the publication of his work Gitanjali: song Offerings. He translated the poem into English by himself. The translation of Gitanjali earned him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913. He is believed to be heavily influenced by Indian traditions and history. His works are deeply rooted in Indian religious ideas and Upanishadic themes to an extent. This paper aims to study the mystical beauty of Geetanjali

Keywords: mysticism, spirituality, divinity, God, Hinduism, Tagore, Gitanjali

Rabindranath Tagore, born on 7th May, 1861, in Kolkata, Indian, was an Indian polymath, dramatist, novelist, short story writer and writer of many other literary works. He was also a musician, painter, actor, producer-director, educator, nationalist and social reformer. Buddhadeva Bose, a modernist Indian writer says about Tagore in *An Acre of Green Grass*-

"The point is not that his writings run into a hundred thousand pages of print, covering every form and aspect of literature, though this matters: he is a source, a waterfall, flowing out in a hundred streams, a hundred rhythms, incessantly."

Tagore along with Gandhi were instrumental in shaping the Indian cultural renaissance. Tagore's works showcase his growth as an artist and also chronicled the artistic, cultural and political scenarios of India in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In his essay "My Life", he writes about how his life was influenced by three revolutionary movements: the religious reform movement led by Raja Rammohan Roy who also found the Brahmo Samaj; the literary movement led by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and the Indian National Movement. In his early days, Tagore was inspired by the artistic environment of his home, the pious character of his father and the beauty of nature. He was also influenced by the Vaishnava poets of medieval Bengal and the folk literature and culture of Bengal, classical aesthetics of India and philosophical heritage, and the modern European literary tradition especially the romantic poets. He mixed the visions of the mystics of India with the traditions of the English romantic poets. His writings were also influenced by Kalidasa and Bauls.

The publication of Gitanjali was the most significant even in Tagore's writing career. Published on 14th august 1910, it was originally written on Bengali and consisted of 157 poems. The English translation of Gitanjali is a collection of 103 songs translated by Tagore himself. The translation has been heavily altered and large chunks of the poems were left out. The English version of Gitanjali won him the Noble prize Gitanjali provided Tagore with international prominence. Many European writers like Ezra Pound, and many others.

The word 'gitanjali' is composed of two words: 'gita' meaning song and 'anjali' meaning offerings. Mysticism can be heavily traced in almost all of the poems in Gitanjali. Gitanjali is a work which portrays complex Hindu mysticism. The lyrics are the poet's meditation on God. Tagore's personal experience with God and the nature helped him get inspirations for the work. Edward J Thompson, Tagore's biographer says in the regard of the collection:

"What matters in Tagore is his personal experience of God. Of the depth and sincerity of this experience no one who has read Gitanjali can doubt. God is strangely close to his thought. He is often more theistic than any Western theist.....God becomes more personalized for him, the Indian, in the most intimate, individual fashion.....I can only assume that he found it so in personal experience."

Gitanjali is a collection of 103 songs of devotion which were selected and translated from Bengali to English by Tagore himself. His work was heavily influenced by the Bhakti School of poetry and the form of Vaishnava poetry. Tagore tries to establish a connection between the almighty and the human soul. Gitanjali includes songs made as offerings by the poet to God. Tagore wants man to realise the beauty around him and to accept the presence of the divine in his life. Gitanjali also showcases the love for God. It exhibits the entire range of love, from human love offered to God as total devotion. Tagore

employs various figures of speech like symbols, images, metaphors and similes to describe his relationship with God. Gitanjali performs as a powerful portrayal of Tagore's desire to unite with God. Each song showcases the union with God in various forms.

In Gitanjali, we come across two kinds of mysticism: nature mysticism and devotional mysticism. For Tagore, mysticism was never separate from nature. He looks for God in nature. For him the worship of nature is the worship of God. Through the songs, he yearns for a communion with God. The mystical life is a contemplative life and it is where the individual is completely detached from the materialistic life and worldly concerns. But according to Tagore's principle of mysticism one doesn't necessarily surrender the world but accomplish a sense of detachment. Tagore was also influenced by the idea that the body is the one that dies; the soul is the one that lives on. Death according to him is only a shift in the path. After death, the soul enters that universe and goes on to take another shape and continues to live in the exterior world.

From the beginning itself, Gitanjali is introduced as a mystical piece of work. Through the work, Tagore has used various personas, for instance, Maiden, Devotees, Beggar, Musician, Traveller, Servant, Friend, Child and beloved to establish his relationship with God. These are used to depict the nine forms of devotion in India for example, Sravana, Kirtana, Archana and others.

In the first chapter itself, Tagore talks about the greatness of the almighty. He talks about the immortality of the human soul despite the human body being mortal.

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

He describes his connection with the divine as eternal. The connection he has with the almighty continues to fill his empty vessel with life. It is a gift which is infinite.

In the second chapter, Tagore is perhaps taking about the concept of Kirtan. Kirtan is derived from Sanskrit root. It is the act of singing praises and glorifying divinity. Kirtan can have different forms such as poetry, drama, dance or any form of oral recitation. Kirtana was popularised by Hindu medieval era bhakti movement. Kirtana's ultimate purpose is to awake and nurture the divine. Music is seen as an instrument to convey one's emotions and to evoke feelings of love for the almighty. In the chapter two of Gitanjali, we see that the writer talks about how singing for the almighty fills his heart with pride.

"When thou commandest me to sing, it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes"

He compares his adoration with the wings of a 'bird on its flight across the sea'. He expresses the depth of his devotion by saying that while singing praises for the almighty, he totally loses himself to devotion. He regards the almighty as his friend which establishes his close bond and the depth of his devotion. We can trace the theme of describing God as the eternal beloved. Tagore personifies God as a lover, a friend and a master. This idea is similar to that of the Bhakti saints who envisioned God as a companion. Tagore talks about surrendering himself to the devotion of the almighty which is similar to the idea of the Sufi poets.

Next, he talks about the purity of the body and soul. He acknowledges the need of purity in life and in conduct. He declares that he will keep away all untruth and evil away from himself. He says that he will keep his love in flower as it is the holy shrine of divinity in his heart. His devotion gives him the strength to act.

Tagore talks about the act of surrounding the materialistic needs and worldly relations in chapter seven.

"Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music."

He talks about how his beloved has no pride of dress or decoration. He dedicates the love of him and his beloved to God. He has used the symbol of the flute to showcase his devotion. He prays that divinity fills his soul like how music fills a flute.

Tagore defines devotion in his own terms. He is a firm believer in the union of man and God but he doesn't support blind faith. In chapter eleven, he tells the readers to leave the chanting and singing and telling of beads. He tells them that God is not present in the lonely dark corners of the temple but rather in the nature. He says God is in the sun and shower that comes over the hardworking tillers. He tells the readers to leave the fanciness of Bhakti and to toil in the soil.

"Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow."

Gitanjali is the account of Tagore's longing for communion with God. Through his poems, he expresses his longing, hope and even conviction. We can observe the essence of Sufism in Gitanjali. Sufism is a social and religious movement in Islam during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Sufism believes in the inward search of God and spiritual closeness. Sufism believes that God is one and the world is a reflection of God. It considers the soul as a part of the almighty. Sufi mystics welcome death as it leads to the liberation of the soul which got trapped in the human body. Tagore talks about similar idea through his poems. In Chapter thirteen, he expresses his desire to meet the divine by saying that he lives in the hope of meeting him.

"I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice, only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house."

The above lines prove the depth of his faith. He has neither seen nor heard him but has felt his presence in his life. In Chapter seventeen too he says that he is just waiting to give himself up to God.

"I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands"

He says that people call him heedless but they will never understand his love. His sole wish is to surrender himself to the almighty.

In chapter twenty, he uses the symbol of a flower to depict the arrival of divinity. Even in his darkest days the fragrance of the flower gave him hope. Fragrance here depicts his faith. Faith in the almighty acts like a guiding light in our darkest days. This is what Tagore has tried to deliver.

Tagore has employed various elements of nature to portray his faith and divinity. He finds the presence of God in the nature around him. For him God and nature are not two separate beings. He believes that the union of man and the nature can help us reach God. He considers the beauty of nature as a proof of the existence of God. Tagore can also be considered a romanticist. He beautifies and spiritualises nature. He employs Vedantic philosophy according to which Nature and God are Prakriti and Purusha. He says that, "It was not the beauty of nature that gave him joy and peace, but the life in nature". In chapter twenty-seven, we see Tagore uses the symbol of clouds and rain to denote confusion and pain. He says the darkness stirs in him. He prays to God to kindle the fire of faith in to eradicate the darkness of confusion.

"Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy life."

He is almost desperate mood to be with God. In chapter thirty-nine, he prays to God to shower mercy on him. He prays him to bring him peace and rest in tumultuous times. He uses light and thunder to show the power of the almighty.

In chapter fifty-three, Tagore uses the image of a sword to denote the pain with which he needs to cut off all his bodily and materialistic desires. In Buddhist philosophy, the sword is treated as fire with which one needs to burn out all the unwanted passions. The sword here is used as a weapon against materiality. Tagore write:

"Thy sword with its curve of lightning like the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu"

The divine bird of Lord Vishnu is Garuda. Garuda is the enemy of snakes and in Hindu philosophy, snakes represent sexuality. So, Tagore here tries to say that he uses faith and devotion to fight off his desires and unwanted passions.

He uses many picturesque and sensuous expressions in Gitanjali. He derives all these images from nature to symbolise human passion, longing and ideals. The elements of nature are eternal which also denotes the infinitude and eternity of God himself. S.B Mukherji writes regarding Tagore:

"A vision steeped in wonders, mystery and boundless joy fuses the human body and spirit and nature into a harmony. An exalting rapture breathes into a vision of timeless unison – physical as well as spiritual – with nature's form and phenomena, into the primitive bond of creative unity with the universe; into the sense of oneness with lights and waves, with flowers and fragrance, with the starry sapphires. They blend and merge into a paean of joy and wonder, into an affirmation welling from inner spiritual apprehension."

Similar to Wordsworth, Tagore thinks that there is a certain harmony which exists between the spirit of nature and man's mind. Nature performs as a moral guide to man. She teaches him virtue and simplicity. Nature gives us peace and joy in life. Tagore is a romantic mystic. To him oneness with nature equals to oneness with God. The fusion of God and nature is a predominant theme in Gitanjali. He expresses his mystical vision of the union of God, Man and Nature through the symbols he employs. Edward Thompson says that no poet ever lived had a more constant and intimate connection with like Tagore does. Tagore glorifies the object of nature as eternity.

The concept of spiritual humanism believes in the ability of human beings to solve the problems by using logic and science. It fuses traditional religious behaviours and scientific humanist inquiry. We can observe this concept in Gitanjali. For Tagore, detachment, asceticism and deliverance are balanced with the love of humanism. For him, devotion does not mean renunciation of the world of senses. He believes that relationship of soul with God cannot be established without the relationship of soul with man. He doesn't condone blind worship. In chapter eleven of Gitanjali, he talks about the omnipresence of God. He says that God is present where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and also where the path maker is breaking the stones. He is in the rain and in the dust too. He advises the idol worshippers to leave their blind worship and the priests to give up their counting of breads and singing and chanting of mantras. Tagore's idea of spirituality rejects the idea of isolated worship. He finds God among people. Songs of Gitanjali showcase that Tagore is a poet of Man. He believes that all human beings despite of their differences are creation of God. God is in all. He equates service to man with devotion to God. In chapter thirty-five, he prays to God for the development and the attainment of an ideal state of his country. He prays that the citizens should be fearless and gain self-respect and dignity. For Tagore, spirituality comes from the surrender of the ego and embracing love for both God and man.

Gitanjali carries the essence of Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is a philosophical and literary movement which emphasizes on the greatness of human and nature and their connection to divinity and spirituality. After reading Gitanjali, one can consider Tagore as a transcendentalist. In Gitanjali he expresses a deep longing to unite with the divine. He expresses self-transcendentalism through this. Self-transcendentalism states that individuals can transcend beyond their personal limitations and inhabitations to and connect with a greater universal truth. Nature can also be seen as an element of transcendentalism. In Gitanjali, we can observe Tagore equating the connection with nature to the connection with God. Nature is observed as the manifestation of divinity. He uses elements of nature and imageries like of clouds, waves, storms, rain to symbolise the presence of divine in the nature. The river, flower, sun, moon, stars all are symbols used to depict the love and abundance of divinity.

Gitanjali can be said to be based on the idea that God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. Tagore feels the presence of God in the nature around him and the people. This also creates a sense of universal brotherhood in him. In chapter five, he says that during summers when the nature is the most alive, he feels the potential of the supreme soul. He says that then is the time to sit with 'thee'. He enjoys the celebrations of divinity. He wants

to emerge himself in the celebration of the divine till his soul becomes one with God and “offer thee my silent salutation” (chapter 16, Gitanjali). He has accepted God as his companion. He wishes to sail along with him on an eternal pilgrimage. In Chapter forty-two he says,

“Early in the day it was whispered that we should sail in a boat, only thou and I, and never a soul in the world would know of this our pilgrimage to no country and to no end. In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words.”

Tagore is not a predominantly a religious person. His poems From Gitanjali are offering to God. He says that he has nothing more to offer. “I am just as poor as a bird, or as rich as a bird. I can sing a song every morning fresh and new, in gratefulness. That is my prayer.” Tagore was never a ritualistic person. He said that he never read scriptures. He wished to offer God exactly what is there in his heart. He said that only experience can satisfy him, fulfil his search and can give him trust in existence. Gitanjali is a prove of his beliefs and devotion. Gitanjali is the best example of his devotion.

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