

“Religion and Mysticism in the Selected Works of Rabindranath Tagore”

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ABSTRACT: Rabindranath Tagore (7 May 1861-7 August 1941), was a Bengali poet, playwright, novelist, artist, and composer whose works reinstitute Bengali Literature and Music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sobriquet Gurudev, Whose works transformed Bengali literature and music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 and became Asia’s First Noble Laureate. In Indian English dramas, Tagore is known for the English transcreations of his Bengali plays. He may even be regarded as one of the pioneers of drama in this country. My research paper is a respective attempt to get a glance at Rabindranath Tagore's selected works as a prominent writer of religion and mysticism.

Tagore's approach to the Upanishads is unique. The religious attitude, according to Tagore, provides man with a vision of the beyond. The religious soul feels in its core the call of the beyond. By subordinating the brute nature to what we consider as the truth of man, religion has its function in reconciling the contradiction Tagore's mysticism was not an inspiration for the future; it was a realization of the present. He does not preach the outward renunciation of an unselfish and dedicated life. His mysticism seeks to let in the radiance of higher light, so that God's light may fall upon our earthly joys and activities and transfigure them into divine things. Tagore feels that his personality remains united with Nature. The different objects of nature are the means for his self-expression. Thus religion is the experimental affirmation of the unity of existence and the fundamental oneness of reality. From this realization follow the fellowship of human beings.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Mysticism, Circumscribed, Creations, Confidence, Subservient, Sympathy.

Rabindranath Tagore (7 May 1861-7 August 1941), was a Bengali poet, playwright, novelist, artist, and composer whose works reinstitute Bengali Literature and Music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sobriquet Gurudev, is another name for Rabindranath Tagore, whose works transformed Bengali literature and music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? He won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 and became Asia's First Noble Laureate. In Indian English dramas, Tagore is known for the English transcriptions of his Bengali plays. He may even be regarded as one of the pioneers of drama in this country. My research paper is a respective attempt to get a glance at Rabindranath Tagore's selected works as a prominent writer of religion and mysticism.

Rabindranath Tagore has been an outstanding personality who put India on the map of the world by spreading his message to the world and by awakening Indian humanity to the awareness of their precious spiritual heritage. He represents the true, spiritual religion of the Upanishads and the Gita. The Upanishads have been the chief unfailing source of his inspiration, his outlook on life, and his religion. He did not look upon the Upanishads as theological scriptures, expounding closed systems of thought. They represented to him the "Himalayas of the Soul". According to Tagore, there is the pervasive presence of God throughout the universe. Speaking about the rishis of India, he says:

“These ancient seers felt in the serene depth of their mind that the same energy, which vibrates and passes into the endless forms of the world, manifests itself in our inner being as consciousness; and there is no break in unity.”

Tagore's approach to the Upanishads is unique. It is that of a Rishi i.e. a religious poet. The Upanishads embody the spiritual experience of the sages and seers of ancient India. Mere scholarship and knowledge of the critical categories of metaphysics are not enough. One has to understand them by a flicker of wisdom and insight which is singularly free from prejudice and partisanship, and which can look beneath appearances.

The religious attitude, according to Tagore, provides man with a vision of the beyond. The religious soul feels in its core the call of the beyond. The inherent truth within a man constantly pushes us beyond our circumscribed present and makes him aware of his claim to express the eternal in him. Tagore says:

“Consciously or unconsciously, we have in our life this feeling of truth which is ever larger than its appearance; for our life is facing the infinite, and it is in movement. Its aspiration is therefore infinitely more than its achievement, and as it goes on it finds that no realization of truth ever leaves it stranded on the desert of finality, but carries it to a region beyond”.

Tagore encounters religion in all the varied experiences of his life and approaches it with his deep spiritual insight, as something very personal and familiar. Prof. Humayan Kabir rightly remarks:

“Tagore's religion was an essential part of his being and influenced every aspect of his life.”

Tagore prefers the Sanskrit word “Dharma” to its English equivalent “religion”. He says in Sadhana:

“Dharma which is usually translated into English as religion has a deeper meaning in our language.

Further, he says:

“Dharma is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. Dharma is the ultimate purpose that is working in ourselves.”

The greatest dharma is to realize our solidarity with the Supreme Power, our highest aim in life. It is the nature and significance of dharma that attracts Tagore and when he speaks about religion, he refers to what he means by Dharma.

The truth of a higher being stirs our religious awareness and implants credence in us that we are greater than our ordinary appearance. Tagore says:

“Religion has its function in reconciling the contradiction, by subordinating the brute nature to what we consider as the truth of man”.

In his effort to break the darkness created by his baser instincts man turns to religion to seek the light. From religion, man receives inspiration and strength to overcome the obstacles created by his own lower self. With the dawn of the religious enlightenment, man understands the futility of misleading temptations and develops an awareness that his ideal is beyond the limits of his narrow self.

Man's religious aspiration fulfills itself in his communion with a personal God. He seeks for a God who is a person like his own self, one within whom he may live. And move and has his being. Thus the religion of man requires God as the personal Being. Without the touch of personal companionship or personal relations to man, God is a bare abstraction in thought. God without personality is the absolute of philosophical conception. Tagore is very adjacent to God. He never expels his 'God' in a far-off 'Heaven'. He writes:

“You come down from your throne and stood at my cottage door.

In the play *The King of the Dark Chamber* one of the characters asks:

How can you explain all this order and regularity if there is no God?”

Tagore never defines God in negative terms saying 'not this, not this. The sky, the seed, the tree, and so many other things, Tagore relates to God by calling Him by such names. Tagore's God is not nameless and formless. He reflects himself in death and immortality. Tagore defines God as Love. The Supreme person is full of love for all creatures. He says:

“The Supreme Person whose spirit is over us all, love for whom comprehends love for all creatures and exceeds in-depth and strength all other loves leading to difficult endeavors and martyrdoms that have no other gain than the fulfillment of this love itself”.

The craving of the human soul can be satisfied only when it succeeds in discovering the Eternal object of love. Tagore conceives of God not only as an eternal lover but also as a father and friend. Tagore asserts that God needs a man as much as man needs God. This need is the need for love.

Tagore's God is a lover of man, not a dispenser of man exercising his power with fire and wrath. For Tagore, there is no Doomsday, but every day comes with a message of a loving God, who is always expressing his love through the various manifestations of beauty and grace.

In the play, *Sanyasi's* theme is the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite. Tagore wrote in *Reminiscences*:

“The play should be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work; this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt- the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite”.

The *Sanyasi* mistakenly believes that he can find truth in the emptiness of self. He tries to cut all bonds with the world but he cannot resist the affection of a little girl, *Vasanti*, the untouchable whose death shocks him into a realization that true emancipation can only be achieved through

the bonds of human affections. He realizes that his earlier vows are meaningless. The great lesson nature teaches him is:

“The birds fly in the sky not to fly away into the emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth.....The finite is the infinite and love knows its truth”.

The true destiny or mission of the religious soul is to be a member of society recognizing the finite and boundless possibilities of man and offering oneself up entirely and exhaust less to the service of one's fellows. The enigmatic feeling of kinship or solidarity with the universe expresses itself in the work for exchanged earth and contented humankind.

“Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where the feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost”.

Rabindranath has never denied the world and the man. Always he has emphatically admitted their existence and it is no wonder that his religion should be centered, around man. Human personality is not a mean thing; its value is great since it can come in union with the Divine Personality.

The philosophy of religion and mysticism is an absolute utopianism of Tagore's palpable time. The concrete dynamic life at the center of things, giving rise to the roar of the wind and the surge of the sea is his supreme spirit and always residing at a safe distance from the world.

According to Tagore, to seek God is to seek man, and to love God is to love man. For him, God consists in loving all that he has created and the best mode of worship is to serve the suffering mankind. God lives among the humblest and the lowliest, and we must search for Him there. People who shun the downtrodden and the humble can never attain Him.

God loves simplicity and reality. God does not like the show of making worship. The worshipers and followers of God renounce the world of work and duty and segregate themselves in the dark corner of a temple singing devotional songs, chanting mantras, and counting beads in the name of God's worship. They are mistaken and deceiving themselves. They should stop doing this and realize the truth. Worship in an ivory tower or the secluded corner of a temple is futile. The path of God's realization lies through the performance of the ordinary duties of life. He says:

“Leaves this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner in a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!”

The purity of soul and conduct is the essential condition in the realization of God. These can be achieved through very rigorous spiritual discipline. The soul and body must be purified, and rid of all evils of ego, vanity, selfishness, avarice, etc; that contaminate the soul. The ego is evil. Even the most rigorous spiritual discipline is not sufficient to rid the evil of the ego and this causes great embarrassment and shame to the devotee, desirous of reunion with the divine.

Tagore was a true mystic and he always craves union with the Creator. Not only that the promises to keep himself pure in body and soul but also worthy of his Lord:

“Life of my life. I shall ever try to keep my body pure,

Knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.

I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And I shall endeavor to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act”.

God's presence is all-pervasive. He is imminent through the universe. Man's body, mind, heart, and actions are pervaded by God. For that reason, man has to keep himself immaculate from all evils thus his heart, body, and mind may be the abode of God in the actual sense of the world.

Tagore's mysticism was not an inspiration for the future; it was a realization of the present. He does not preach the outward renunciation of an unselfish and dedicated life. His mysticism seeks to let in the radiance of higher light, so that God's light may fall upon our earthly joys and activities and transfigure them into divine things.

Tagore feels that his personality remains united with Nature. The different objects of nature are the means for his self-expression. He says:

“I express myself in the very mosses, grasses, leaves, and branches of the tree.

His self is spread all over nature, in trees, plants, and creepers. His entire life is charmed and impressed by the beauties of nature”.

Tagore says:

“The first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with nature”.

Thus there is a harmony in the thoughts and feelings of man with that of nature. This relationship is unbreakable and invisible. The separation of the human being from nature is a bare abstraction. This separation is similar to the separation of the petals of the flower from its bud.

The same idea is put in *The Cycle of Spring*:

“This outer world has been made with a lavish expenditure of sun and moon and stars. Let us enjoy it, and then we can save God’s face for indulging in such extravagance”.

Tagore also deals with the conflict between old principles and new ones, in his two-act play *Malini* in depth. Princess Malini becomes the target of attack by the Brahmins because she learns of Buddhism which demands her banishment. The Brahmins assemble in front of the royal palace, determined to achieve their purpose of having her banished. At this moment Malini herself appears before them. Surprisingly, most of the Brahmins are fascinated and bewitched by her beauty of holiness, and they become converted to the faith of which she is the advocate and champion. These converted Brahmins now hail her as "Goddess" and "Mother", and describe her as the divine soul of this world. However, two people stand apart from them. They are Kemankar and Supriya. The former decides to leave the country to secure foreign help to oppose and stamp out the Buddhist heresy, but Supriya feels drawn toward Malini and reveals Kemankar's secret to the King. Kemankar is captured, and the King feels deeply indebted to Supriya. But Supriya knows also that she has behaved like a traitor to Kemankar. Eventually Kemankar, in an embrace of apparent reconciliation with Supriya, strikes her with his chains and kills her. Now the King would certainly have murdered Kemankar; but Malini appeals to him, saying, “Father, forgive Kemankar!” The play *Malini* ends with Malini’s appeal when the king is about to kill the slayer. Tagore shows how the new principle poses a challenge to the old one. The squabble can be perceived in the play *Malini* in Brahmin’s conversation:

“BRAHMIN: We must have an audience with our king to tell him that a snake that has raised his poisonous hood from his own nest is aiming at the heart of our sacred religion.

SUPRIYA: Religion? I am stupid. I do not understand you tell me, sir, is it your religion that claims the banishment of an innocent girl?”

According to Tagore's assurance, the Hindu religion can counter the onslaught of modern civilization, culture, and religion under circumstances that purges itself of its discrimination.

The unseen King represents God, in the play *The King of the Dark Chamber*; no one can see but only register in internal awareness. The human soul which is ignorant of its own identity is symbolized by Queen Sudarshana. Self-realization is the only tool through which the true nature of God comes.

The inner consciousness of the man represents in the *Dark Chamber*. It is in this inner consciousness that God must be realized as the formless divine presence. When this realization takes place, God should be realized in various shapes and forms in the outside world. Presence of God in the outside world, Queen Sudarshana makes a different mistake by insisting upon a visible. Tagore has shown that this one-sided attempt to realize God fails. Indeed that is the precise reason why at the end of the play when Queen Sudarshana has realized the divine presence in her heart, the King says:

“I open the doors of this dark room today, the game is finished here! Come, come with me now, and come outside into the light!”

Tagore believes that the human soul has come to us from the divine, and goes back to its source with the death of the body. The numerous gifts that we enjoy have their source in God, and they returned to Him undiminished, as the river passes through the villages and fields irrigating them, without its water being diminished in any way. It continues to flow till it mingles with the sea. The sojourn of the human soul on this earth may be likened to the flow of a river through fields and villages. Ultimately, the human soul also becomes one with the sea of eternity.

Thus Tagore's plays realistically depict the progress of an individual's awareness and consciousness. To conclude, we can say that religion for Tagore is the man's realization of the fellowship with God, through service, devotion, and contemplation. True religion is by which all human beings must finally be measured and redeemed that which, ignoring man-made prejudices restores the fundamental valuation. Thus religion is the experimental affirmation of the unity of existence and the fundamental oneness of reality. From this realization follow the fellowship of human beings.

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