

Re -visioning Indianness: Tagore’s *Gitanjali*

Dr. Indrajeet Mishra*



Abstract:

Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941) is a highly acclaimed versatile genius- poet, dramatist, short story writer, painter, composer and a nationalist. He is one of the pillars among pre-independence poets in terms of establishing Indian poetic tradition. However, tradition of poetry in India is since times immemorial but the colonization brought a kind of challenge to the poets for narrating true Indian sensibility in English. Tagore creates a paradigm which transcends boundary of language and geography. He depicts poetics of spirituality narrating the longingness of a soul for God. He enjoys living touch of God in the smiling flowers, the thick forest and green grass. He realizes immanent presence of infinite through every finite object. The poetic power Tagore was blessed with enabled him to compose magnum opus like *Gitanjali* and other poems which record synthesis of the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and Indian systems of thought. The paper attempts to explore different aspects of Indianness ingrained in the poem *Gitanjali* with the available range of scholarship.

Key Words: *Poetics of Spirituality, Vedas, Upanisheds, Bhakti, Humanism, Post-colonial Vision*

He brought renaissance in English writing by reviving rishi tradition of poetry, in this tradition poetry is largely dedicated to the Supreme Being. His creative fecundity uniquely harmonizes nature with the Divine. His poetry is deeply associated with creative myths of *The Rig Veda*. The primeval forces in The Rig Veda are indicated with the absence of binaries of the material world. The nothingness and void with the glorious feat of God transformed into material substances. Hence, Tagore experiences the presence of Infinite through natural scenes and objects and enjoys mystical experiences. Tagore was bilingual and also did translation of his own writing into English from Bengali. In the whole work of Tagore, the governing teleology is that the world is microcosm of macrocosm. Tagore's profound faith in God constitutes his aesthetics. He believes that God can be realized in every nook and corner of the world, the living and the non-living are emanation of the Divine. In this term he is closely allied with transcendentalism, pantheism and Vedantism. Charu Sheel Singh writes in his article, "Indian English Cultural/ Literary Criticism":

Tagore's canon rests on the view that the work of art is the outer manifestation of the essence that is godly in nature. The epistemic foundations of the work of art rest on perceiving the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular, and the permanent in the temporal (111).

Tagore beautifully depicts that the entire cosmos is the emanation of God, *ekoham bahushyami*. God is one but His manifestation is different. This is the conviction of Tagore that denotes the idea of basic oneness of all which is also the cardinal principle of mysticism. Tagore's *Geetanjali* is replete with non-dualism, platonism, pantheism and mysticism. All these systems of philosophy reveal that soul is permanent and of lasting value whereas all other material existence is ephemeral.

Gitanjali's songs are recording of drama of human soul in its progress from finite to the infinite. The relationship between the two is represented in the mood of divine romance and in the nuptial metaphor of devotional poets. The great tradition of devotional poetry is centered on the love of Radha and Krishna. The analogy of lover and beloved is used by mystics of all over the world to express the relationship between human soul and God. The human soul is considered as Radha or the beloved perpetually waiting for the arrival of lover or the bridegroom, Krishna. Hindi devotional poet, Kabir calls it, "Ram ki bahuria". The mystic tone, verbal precision, concrete imagery, sublime thought, establish devotion and love of the poet to the God. Like a true mystic and divine seeker his soul leaps up to come out of its sheath- the body. He believes in the final merger with the God and it is possible through self-identification and self-realization because God is within:

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own,
and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the
innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said "Here art thou!"

The question and the cry "Oh, where?" melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance "I am!" (*G Song No. 12, 20*)

Tagore's conception of God is non-dualistic. His *Gitanjali* is dedicated to Almighty in which the poet appears to be a quest figure firmly rooted in the Vaishnavite poetic tradition of ancient India. Tagore presents himself as a child before God as it happens in the Vaishnava and Shaiva tradition, poets belonging to these traditions regard themselves as a lover of God. He expresses that just at the touch of His hand his heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable. Tagore goes on to put on record his gratefulness to God and happily recounts that God has bestowed upon him multiple gifts, here, Tagore represents entire human race. He seems to be overpowered with sense of gratitude, "The infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill" (*G Song No. 1, 15*)

Tagore in his poetry depicts the constant struggle of human soul to have merger with the larger entity. The soul caught in the cobweb of body makes continuous attempt to release itself from the material bondage. Tagore says that truth of divine immanence can be realized only by His grace. Man realizes himself and finds God within him not outside. The living entity has the intelligence to understand divine laws and thus, the soul could hope to free itself from the cyclical bondage. Tagore declares immortality of the soul. Human soul is eternal and forever. Human body is like vessel or cover which can easily be broken or removed but cyclicity continues- births deaths and rebirths:

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

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new (*G Song No. 1, 15*).

The above quoted lines of *Gitanjali* can be best interpreted through the *Bhagavadgita*'s chapter second and verse no. 22 where Krishna says to Arjuna, as a person puts on new garments, giving up the old ones similarly, soul accepts new material body and gives up the old and the useless one. To quote:

Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya
navani grhnati naro parani
tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany
anyani samyati navani dehi (Radhakrishnan 122).

Death is the renewal of life. Therefore, death is a matter of celebration as we find all the Victorian poets have glorified death. Tagore regards death as a servant to God that lets human being understand and realize the spiritual significance and real meaning of life as Shakespeare declares in *Macbeth*, life is, “full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing” (77).

In *Gitanjali* and other poems, Tagore surrenders himself like a true devotee believing that the Almighty is behind each and everything that is happening in the world. Human heart according to him is the seat of God hence, it is his duty to reflect the innermost feelings which are there. The creative reflections like poetry, painting, music all are gifts to mankind by ultimate creator, unless there is blessing of master poet, timeless and relevant poetry is impossible:

My song has put off her adornments

She has no pride of dress and decoration. Ornaments would mar our union; they will come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers

My poet’s vanity dies in shame before thy sight. O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for/thee to fill with music (G Song No. 7, 17).

M. Abbe Bremond categorises *Gitanjali* as pure poetry and defines “pure poetry aspires to a condition of prayer. Such a poetry is half a prayer from below, half a whisper from above: the prayer evoking the response or whisper provoking the prayer, and always whisper and prayer chiming in to song” (111). Tagore’s approach to God is similar to that of Tulsidas, Surdas, Meera, Nanak among others. At many occasions the views of Tagore echo the idea of Tulsi that “Jaki kripa lavles te matimand Tulsids hun”. There is a custom of owning the God in Bhakti and Sufi tradition like Meera says, “Mere to Giridhar Gopal dujo na koy”. KRS Iyengar pertinently remarks, “The *Gitanjali* songs are mainly poems of Bhakti in the great Indian tradition” (111). Tagore treats God as a lover like the Sufies, he describes the romantic encounter between God and himself in the following lines:

Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full thus it is that thou hast come down to me.

O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?

Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this wealth.

In my heart is the endless play of thy delight

In my life Thy will is ever taking shape (G, Song No 56, 52).

Relationship between individual soul and God is that of groom and bride which reminds of the principle of Sankhya’s prakriti and purush. One is the transcendental being who is the world and the other is its semantic components.

Tagore regards God as omnipresent and omniscient like other philosophers of Indian tradition. He writes, “the light of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all storm, obstacle and rushes on” (G Song No. 3, 15). Here the non-dualistic philosophy comes into play which has also been expressed by one of the most famous Hindi poets Kabir who states:

Jal beech kumbh kumbh beech jal hai

Futa kumbh jal jal hi samana.

The poet like a true seeker wants to realize God by his prayers. He wishes that God should improve his shortcomings and purify him so as to make him realize God fully. He wishes that like a musician stretches the strings of the musical instrument in order to produce sweet music God should tighten the strings of his senses so that he could be attuned with the higher sensibility. Tagore expresses, “I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind” (G Song No. 3, 15). Tagore believes that the light of reason which is lighted by God is a gift for mankind to keep moving in the right direction and distinguish truth from untruth. Iyengar remarks:

The phenomenal world in which the individual plays his obscure part is really the leela or the drama of the Supreme, and to know this is to participate in the total joy of the cosmic play and give utterance to the joy in ineffable song. Even so is the seemingly little united with vast, and frail man is filled with the joy, power and glory of the infinite” (111).

Tagore can be regarded as a great humanist. He reveals in many songs of *Gitanjali* that how all creatures of nature including human beings are manifestations of the same God but the difference is of degree between them. Soul obtains human body after innumerable births as lower species, so, the highest manifestation of divinity is in human body. However, Tagore states that the best way to serve God is not only man and woman but the lowliest of the low:

LEAVE this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! (G Song No. 11, 20)

Tagore closely resembles Swami Vivekananda whose belief was not in invisible god, but in the might of the material man who can see God in all cultural cycle. Vivekananda said God is present not in The *Vedas*, *Bible* or *Koran* rather He is present in the form of living creatures. To quote from the poem, “The Living God”:

He who is at once the high and low,

The sinner and the Saint,

Both God and worm,
Him worship- Visible, Knowable, real, omnipresent,
Break all other idols! (*ISGO* 20)

As a matter of fact, Tagore wrote at a time when India was passing through a very difficult phase and there were problem of human impoverishment all around- social inequality, superstition untouchability, neglect of physical labour on the name of spirituality were prevalent, at such a time he not only came forward with humanist approach but also practical views which served as a guideline for general people. Like he propagated the view that God is not to be found in the temples and chanting mantras and telling of the beads is not enough we should try to work hard and earn our livelihood, God is there where the farmer is tilling the field .Tagore is a poet of hope and love for the common folk:

Those who walk on the path of pride crushing the lowly life
under their tread, covering the tender green of the earth with
their footprints in blood;

Let them rejoice, and thank thee, Lord, for the day is theirs.
But I am thankful that my lot lies with humble who suffer and
bear the burden of power, and hide their faces and stifle their
sobs in the dark (Tagore, *Fruit- Gathering*, 34).

Tagore's *Gitanjali* has exhibited the pan Indian flavour and taste in which he has been able to depict the true spirit of Indian epistemology that is predominant with faith in God and asceticism along with he is able to create Indian atmosphere in the general tone and accent of the lyrics. V K Gokak rightly observes:

Mystical poetry has been the pet aversion of most critics in modern Europe and the fashion has also spread to certain literary circles in India. This is unfortunate, for by nothing else is India so famous all over the world as by her moments of mystical and spiritual perception. Modern Indian mysticism is, besides, mysticism of the positive kind which believes in the unity of spirit and matter and the interdependence of the individual and the collectivity....It may help to stimulate in other parts of the world a right cultivation of the certain parts of the human personality which have generally lain dormant for centuries (55).

Tagore, through his works represents true spirit of India. His other collections also deal with glory, love and beauty of God. He happily reconciles matter and spirit like Walt Whitman. Tagore's style consists of simplicity, lucidity and prosaic directness. He seems adept in the use of *Vedas* and myths, feudal imagery, colorful idioms and appropriate figures of speeches. He

synthesizes all that is best in mystical experiences of the East and West both. He combined traditional poetic tradition of India and once again brought back climax of Kalidas's romanticism. Tagore has been praised and fulminated equally. He was highly critical of imperialism which corrupts man's character and culture both. However, he declared arrival of West as providential and attention must be paid to this very fact. He accentuates that there is need to develop history of civilization. The cultural harmony comes in association not in dissociation. Hence, he was not of the opinion to segregate India entirely from the west. His aim was to find out the soul of east and to transpose the dichotomy of east and west in creative unity. He had broader and larger vision of spiritual altruism. Tagore envisions for a better future of humanity.

References

- Gokak, V.K. "A Question of Variety" in *Contemporary Indian English Verse: An Evaluation*.
Ed. Chirantan Kulshrestha: New Delhi: Arnold Heinmann, Reprint, 1982.
Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: New Delhi: Sterling, 2006.
Radhakrishnan, S. *The Bhagavadgita*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010.
Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. A W Verity. New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1962.
Singh, Charu Sheel. "Indian English Cultural/Literary Criticism" in *Spectrum History of Indian Literature in English*. Ed. Ram Sewak Singh & Charu Sheel Singh. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1997, p. 110-126.
Tagore, Rabindranath. "Gitanjali-Song Offerings" in An e-book Presentation by The Spiritual Bee. www.spiritualbee.com
-----"Fruit- Gathering" trans. by the Macmillan Company: New York, 1916
<https://thevirtuallibrary.org>
Vivekanand, Swami. *In Search of God and Other Poems*. Kolkata : Advaita Ashrama, 2014, Reprint.

** Assistant Professor
Department of English
DAV PG College, Varanasi
Email- indrajeetmishra1972@gmail.com*