

# “Glory to God in the highest...”: Tagore’s religiosity in *Gitanjali*

## Abstract

The reception of the Nobel Prize by Rabindranath Tagore created an unprecedented stirring in the Western world by inducing a new interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality. The simplicity of the verses in *Gitanjali* was a novel experience for the Western readers who at once felt drawn towards the intimacy contained in them. The depth of his humanistic attitude to religion and God earned Tagore an instant popularity and he was translated in a number of European languages. Though the initial enthusiasm subsided with time and many of the enthusiasts came down to criticise his verses from various perspectives, the charm of the poems of *Gitanjali* lies intact and their philosophical means ever relevant. The paper aims to highlight some of the aspects of this philosophy with a view to find out the source of their mesmerising capacity.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, Spirituality, God, Tagore, Gitanjali.

## Introduction

“I touch God in my song  
as the hill touches the far-away sea  
with its waterfall....”

—Rabindranath Tagore, “Fireflies”.

Rabindranath Tagore’s reception of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 as the first Asian was a formal acknowledgement of the sage poet’s genius by the western world, which had lately come to the experience of a plunge into his oceanic philosophy. The reception of the award was an outcome of the growing fame of Tagore in that part of the globe which is proved by the fact that *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), the principal work winning him the prize, underwent about a dozen reprints since its first publication in English on 1 November 1912 by the India Society of London. The stir that Tagore’s volume brought into the western literary world can easily be found from the following reaction of William Butler Yeats:

“To take part in honouring Mr. Rabindranath Tagore is one of the great events of my artistic life. I have been carrying about me a book of translation into English prose of a hundred of his Bengali lyrics written within the last ten years; I know of no one in my time who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics.”<sup>1</sup>

Ezra Pound also hailed the publication of *Gitanjali* as “an event in the history of English poetry and of world poetry.”<sup>2</sup> Such applauding speeches are many and to try to quote them is merely to repeat an already established truth. It is more pertinent to enquire into the causes that made the volume a historical landmark to the western intelligentsia.

At the very outset it has to be kept in the mind that Tagore’s English *Gitanjali* is not merely the translation of the 157 poems published in his Bengali collection under the same title in 1910, but, as Sukriti Ghosal notes, contained translations of 53 poems from that original Bengali edition, as well as 50 other poems which were from his drama *Achalayatan* and eight other books of poetry — mainly *Gitimalya* (17 poems), *Naivedya* (15 poems) and *Kheya* (11 poems)<sup>3</sup>. In spite of being collected from different volumes, the poems in *Gitanjali* are bound together by a similar theme. This unity of these can be summed up in the following manner:

“Although for *Gitanjali* Tagore translated songs / poems from different collections, the translations are threaded together by a common theme. Most of them express different moods and feelings of a devotee whose Lord enchants him as a lover, a singer, a flutist, even as death. The relationship has been viewed from a number of angles — pang of separation (Poem 84),



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preparation for a tryst (Poem 93), waiting for the beloved (Poem 41), failure to recognize (Poem 26), the necessity to do off ornaments impeding perfect union (Poem 7) and so on and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

As well known, the subject matter of Tagore's collection is spirituality; he has traced the progress of his relation with the Almighty in the different verses. Though defying classification, the poems found in the volume may be seen to be belonging to two sections—one narrating the poet's quest for God and the second is a realization of Him.<sup>5</sup> The subject is not a novel one in the Indian perspective, but a reiteration of the faith that came down to Tagore through popular religious traditions. In his introduction to 1913 edition of *Gitanjali*, William Butler Yeats rightly traced this very Indian heritage behind Tagore's religiosity "where poetry and religion are the same thing." In India, the petals of religion have been always taking forms of verses and offered to the Almighty's feet. A number of poets had preceded him who had composed simple verses on spiritual themes and won the hearts of the masses, and Kabir, Nanak, Rajab, Dadu, Mirabai, Chandidas and Jnandas are a few among them. But what makes Tagore unique and distinct from his predecessors in the field of composing holy verse is the wholeness with which Tagore lived life. All of these spiritual poets had devoted themselves to the pious worship of the Almighty and resultantly had tasted the essence of piety and spirituality only. They ignored all the calls of life, and experiences other than spiritual ones hardly found any place in their poetry. They were devoted souls with "one aim, one business, one desire", as Matthew Arnold would have termed. But Tagore was a man who lived and loved all the aspects of life, all the vicissitudes of human experience touched and tossed him; both carnal and spiritual love ignited his poetic passion; the strangest aspects and mysteries of life attracted his imagination. "The poet who has sung about nature, about human life, about all the strange essences and depths of life, is now singing about the love of the Bhagavad—this very fact has differentiated Tagore's spiritual poetry from all other spiritual poetry from India and abroad...", says Ajit Kumar Chakraborty on Tagore's spirituality in *Gitanjali*.<sup>6</sup> The same poet who had tasted the nectar of beauty and sweetness, of love and joy in the poems of *The Golden Boat*, *Chitra*, *Kalpana* and *Kshnika*, at that time set out in search of the source of them. The completeness of experience in Tagore's poetry has made it a unique phenomenon in the whole gamut of world literature, and makes him beyond comparison with any other religious poet in the world.

Notwithstanding the fact that in composing the songs of *Gitanjali* Tagore was working under the deep influence of the poets of Vaishnav verses and the spiritual practices described in the *Upanishads*, a deeper reading of Tagore would easily yield that the love of idolatry that has induced the moods of sentiment, separation, union, convergence etc. in the Vaishnav verses, was not the matter of concern for Tagore's poetic sensibility. Tagore's love is mysterious and so is his God; He appears in ever new

and strange forms; when, where and in what form His manifestation will appear amid the deep and strange mysteries of the world, is unknown even to the poet. In verse 50, this King of kings confuses the poet by asking in a beggar's guise "What hast thou to give to me?", can become the king of the fearful night to surprise the villagers in verse 51, can become the poet's playmate to accompany him in his childhood games with equal ease and so on. Rightly exclaimed the Irish Tagore sympathiser Harold Laxness on the diversity of Tagore's concept of his god: "What an enviable god, this god of Tagore: the Great Friend, the Beloved, the Lotus flower, the unknown man playing a lute in the boat yonder on the river!"<sup>7</sup> But Vaishnav verses fail to express such hide and seek game between the worshipped and the worshipper as God is all too visible and accessible to the devotee there. Those versifiers were following merely a conventional religious doctrine and belief system, had accepted a lucid form of asceticism and endeavoured to induce this into the heart of the disciples. But Tagore had not started his journey with any accepted form of devotion in his mind. He had come out in quest of his God and that is no easy task to him. He found with dismay that the finer elements of spirituality were repeatedly getting entangled with the grosser aspects of his life that caused great embarrassment on his way to union with the Almighty. The intimate secret dialogue between the Lord and the devotee found in him may have something common with the Vaishnav verses, but the two differ essentially. The variety in Tagore's spirituality is hardly discerned in those verses.

Tagore's spirituality has an air of secularity about it. In *The Religion of Man*, he describes his religion as "a poet's religion & neither that of an orthodox man of piety nor that of a theologian.... My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as my poetical life. Somehow they are wedded to each other."<sup>8</sup> His growing up in a Brahma family with the inherited ideas from his grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, who was among the founders of the Brahma Samaj in Bengal, and his father Debendranath Tagore played a big role in shaping his religious belief. The Brahmos are not believers in idolatry of traditional Hinduism, but worship the idea of a supreme God called 'Brahma' or the universal spirit. They are believers in monotheistic religion and earnestly follow the teachings of the Upanishads. They believe that the existence of the divine spirit cannot be restricted to any particular place of worship, but is spread all over the world. Therefore, Tagore seeks his Lord not in any temple, but in the living world of ordinary men, where the workers are working, the commoners are toiling: "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust", he declares in verse 11 of *Gitanjali*. The whole creation is a manifestation of Him and in human beings is this manifestation most prominent. Therefore, in his poetry is found an inalienable connection between God, nature and man. Tagore's is a highly humanistic religion. He is not for

renunciation of this world for the search of his God, but is striving to touch His feet through the very fundamental activities of life: "Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight."<sup>9</sup>

But the source of Tagore's spirituality cannot be ascertained in a mere traditional heritage so easily. As Niharranjan Roy has observed, there lies an introspective spirit at the heart of his song offerings that induces a peculiar immediacy to his poems. Therefore, in contrast to the enigmatic philosophies usually encountered in mystical writings, Tagore's verse is always simple and close to the heart. In tune with William Wordsworth's interpretation of the mystical vision—"Tintern Abbey"

"While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things"

Tagore's introspective spirit helps him merge the living and the non-living world into one life which he chooses to call *Jivan-devata*, the Lord or Deity of his life, who inspires and guides him through his life. This Deity dominates and suffuses his inner life and it is the echo of his footsteps that one hears in the more vital and significant poems of *Sonar Tari* through to those of *Gitanjali*.<sup>10</sup>

There lies a melodious simplicity at the core of Tagore's poems in *Gitanjali*. This is the result of a long line of evolution in his poetic genius. *Kheya* (The Ferry) of 1906, a handful of the translated poems of which have secured place in the English *Gitanjali*, marks a remarkable difference in Tagore's poetic approach. This may be seen as new birth, not merely in terms of mood, but also in the world of form alike. The ever-moving yet controlled speed of rhyme and the calm and deep seriousness gave way to a mood expressed in melody. Where the melody conveys the feeling, words become redundant. Melody extracts the pent up language of the mind, just as the west wind extracts the music from the autumnal forest. From then on, the poet started immersing himself into the inexpressible sweetness of melody, forsaking the glow of intelligence, the strength and ecstasy of language, the powerful excitement of imagination. All the ornaments were shed, all the excesses were gone and all intelligence and knowledge disappeared behind the veil of shame; the poet held up his naked heart before the Almighty in the form of dedication. The few words that came out in the form of melody, tearing off the heart, were simple, unornamented, naked and of a rare charm. Therefore, he says in verse 7:

"My song has put off her adornments.  
She has no pride of dress and decoration.  
Ornaments would mar our union; they would  
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."

Though much lost in the process of translation—as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that Tagore's poems

defy translation—this lilting melody is still to be occasionally encountered in the verses of English *Gitanjali*.

It is not that Tagore's maiden effort in writing religious poetry is his *Gitanjali*. Before it, he had written many religious poems since the time of his collection *Manasee*, but those were mainly recordation of prevailing beliefs, not the product of the poet's own spiritual consciousness. In the earlier poems, that follow the prevailing mood of traditional spiritual songs and verses, the efforts go towards creating a landscape, which is scarcely mixed with the author's personal spiritual experience. But the poems of the present volume are the poet's own spiritual experiences, the gospels of his torn self, the secret murmurs of his awakened spiritual consciousness. The distinction of the poems of *Gitanjali* from Tagore's earlier religious poems is well summed up by Ajit Kumar Chakraborty:

"But the earlier religious poems of Rabindranath were composed on the mood of popular worship of Brahma. There was no awakening of the individual spiritual feeling—he had not yet started expressing his own experiences as his own gospels. So, the religious songs of that phase merged with the religious songs prevalent in the contemporary society. But his modern songs (in *Gitanjali*) emerged as the final outpour of his poetic career; these are not merely traditional, but internalized—not of the public, but of his own."<sup>11</sup>

Applauses have been profuse for Tagore's song offerings, but his stormy victory over European hearts can be summed up from the writing of Susan Owen, the mother of Wilfred Owen, one of the most famous among the soldier poets of the World War I, who died in 1918. As Amartya Sen notes<sup>12</sup>, she wrote to Tagore in 1920 that she discovered in Wilfred's notebook found with her dead body in the front and returned to her later, Verse 96 of *Gitanjali* written in his own handwriting with Tagore's name beneath: "When I go from hence, let this be my parting word."

Tagore's religiosity has not only been the centre of interest for the readers over decades, but has also suffered greatest misunderstandings. While speaking about him, Anna Akhmatova, who translated his poems into Russian in the mid-1960s, has identified the source of his religious philosophy to be Hinduism and the Ganges.<sup>13</sup> But this simple identification of Tagore with one particular culture deprives him of the depth and richness of appeal. His philosophy, as expressed in his poetry is, in fact, nurtured by different civilizations as he himself has described his family as the product of "a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and the British."

Tagore's religion is the religion of action, his spirituality is the spirituality of duty. Therefore, his emphatic declaration comes out in his verse:

"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." (Verse 11)

As Niharranjan Roy has noted, Tagore followed an important segment of the total Indian ideal that God cannot be realised by means of knowledge alone; customs, rituals and even faith are sterile if they are not integrated with human life and activity.<sup>14</sup> Tagore wrote in one of his letters, "I count it enough to live and die as a man, loving and trusting the world, unable to look on it either as a delusion of the Creator or a snare of the Devil" and in another, "nothing is more beautiful or great than to perform the ordinary duties of one's daily life simply and naturally."<sup>15</sup> Tagore never believed in self-surrender and adoration sans duties and obligations, but earnestly believed in a life full of arduous responsibilities and prays for strength to bear them. Roy has summed up this aspect of Tagore's spirituality in the following words:

"(Tagore's) ideal is more nearly allied to that of the *Upanishads* than to the *Vaishnava* conception of *bhakti* or surrender of self to God in emotional devotion. Tagore's *bhakti*, surrender to God, is big and alive with vast strength, wisdom and knowledge, a surrender that inspires fruitful and heroic action, a courage undaunted against all opposition and deprivation."<sup>16</sup>

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this paper is to explore the features and nature of Rabindranath Tagore's religiosity as revealed in his most widely known work *Gitanjali*. The different aspects of this religiosity have been considered in respect to different poems in that volume and this would establish the distinction of Tagore as a religious thinker.

#### **Conclusion**

Therefore, Rabindranath Tagore stands as a unique figure among the religious thinkers in India. Though not a hermit or 'swami' in any sense, his poetry would throw challenge to the prevalent spiritual concepts. The peculiar combination of logic and

emotion, of poetic craftsmanship and spiritual awareness has made his poetry unique

#### **Endnotes**

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8. Tagore quoted in Atkinson, David W., "Rabindranath Tagore: The poet and the absolute" in *Studies in Religion*, accessed from <http://sir.sagepub.com/content/13/2/193.citation> on 03.6.17
9. *Gitanjali*, Verse 73
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11. Chakraborty quoted in Niharranjan Roy pg. 115.
12. Sen, Amartya, "Tagore and His India", accessed from [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-article.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-article.html) on 23.5.17.
13. Akhmatova quoted in Sen
14. Roy, p. 156
15. Tagore quoted in Roy
16. Roy. Pp. 157-158