

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S VISION OF RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

India is regarded as the cradle of great religions. She unfolds a wonderful blend of races, cultures, customs, languages, religions and food habits. She is able to assimilate all the great religions and fuse them into a total Indianness. The ancient sages and seers had an idea of the divine and they were guided by this idea. Thus, they raised the country to a great spiritual height.

However, the twentieth century has witnessed a growing religious intolerance among the masses. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 and the subsequent erection of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the destruction of a church at Ahmedabad in Gujarat on 9 August 1998, the inhuman murder of the Australian missionary Graham Stains and his two sons on 23 January 1999 at Manoharpur village in Orissa and the atrocities on Christian missionaries across the country have exposed the ugly side of our country. Such incidents have triggered religious conflicts in the country and all these pose a challenge to our communal harmony. Pluralism seems to have gone out of fashion, but uniformity cannot be the solution. People have an ambivalent attitude toward religion. Whether only one religion is true or all religions are ultimately true or all religions are equally false have polarised people.

Religion is a part and parcel of our life, it is a unique dimension of human nature. Today's age is considered as the Age of Communication. We have seen science and technology making a mind-boggling progress. What was considered impossible about fifty years ago, has become a reality today due to the progress in science and technology. All the same, even in this age, people offer sacrifices to their Gods before setting out on an important work; they break coconut in order to lay the foundation stone to build a bridge. There have been incidents where people arranged frog marriages to please the rain gods and so on. All these are indications of the superstitious attitudes of the people of our nation. Very often these attitudes are equated with religion. Can religion be equated with our feelings and emotions? Does it satisfy the human longings? Is there a universal

religion? Whatever be the answer, people have been fighting in our country today in the name of religion.

As a growing child, I have witnessed what a religious conflict is. It was a Hindu-Christian conflict in the early 1980s at Nanesera in Simdega District, Jharkhand. Both the Christian and the Hindu crowds had gone into frenzy over a hillock, which had been a place of worship for the local Christian community for a long period. It is with pain and a heavy heart that I remember today how my villagers, both Hindus and Christians, got divided into two opposite camps and almost fought each other. However, it was the providence of God that the police were able to control the angry mobs. The conflict was resolved but the seed of enmity still remains in the local people.

I was brought up in a God-fearing family. The memories of my childhood days are still very vivid in my mind— early morning devotional hymns, daily evening prayers, special rosary to Mother Mary in the month of May, becoming an altar boy on Sundays, beautiful little crib during Christmas and alongside the crib lay my new set of cloths and shoes and so on. Going to Sunday Mass was a special joy to me. Once I was back at home after the Sunday Mass, I used to imitate the way the parish priest used to sing during the Mass. All this while the seed of faith was taking roots in me.

However, as I grew older, some of these interests began to vanish. My daily prayers with the family members meant just a ritual to be fulfilled. Early morning devotional hymns were replaced by film songs. Sunday Mass became an occasion to see my friends, and other religious practices were a thing of the past. God had clearly taken the back seat in my life. There was a kind of erosion of faith. There was a clear decline in my faith and I was confronted by a faith crisis or something very similar.

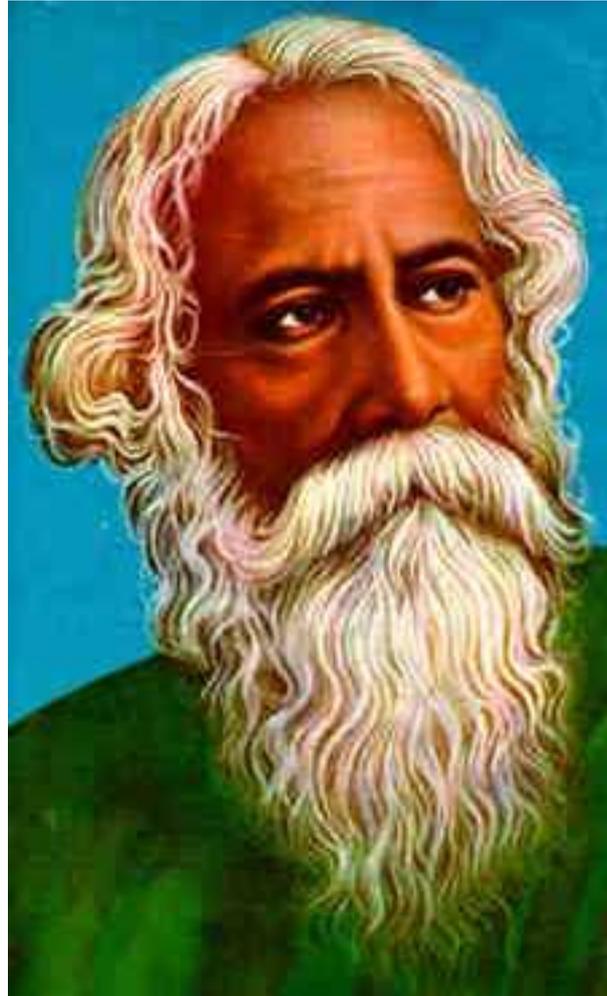
It was in my Pre-Novitiate, in 1996, that I first heard the hymn of Rabindranath Tagore, *This is my prayer to Thee my Lord*. It had a very soothing effect on my mind. This hymn had touched the core of my being. Tagore's unfathomable spirit had rejuvenated my religious instincts. This hymn was a true prayer to me. The more I sang this hymn, the more it began to make sense. People seemed important to me, my own companions, who come from diverse backgrounds, began to look significant to me. It led me to the realisation that all events and life itself are meaningful, people are important, my companions are precious. There is no meaning in life unless I love people and my companions. Our prayer to God is meaningful because God is the creator of the world. He can be seen in the people, in our companions in the events and in the world.

Tagore does not believe in any borrowed religion. He calls his religion “a poet’s religion.” Religion, for him is the essence of human being. Tagore sees God behind the multiplicity which is a creative principle of unity. God cannot be grasped by reason and logic. This implies not only that the divine is immanent in creation but also that the creation itself is a manifestation of the divine. Human beings, for Tagore, are the fullest expressions of the divine. We are created in the image of God. God manifests Himself in the creation. Thus, Tagore sees a harmonious relationship among God, human being and nature. He holds that the world and its particulars are real because they are an expression of the divine.

Tagore sees the beauty of this universe in the harmonious relationship in the face of diversity. Communal disharmony and religious divisions are the results of our limited vision which does not penetrate into the harmonious relationship of the world, but settles for usefulness and efficiency. In order to lead a good life, we need to transcend our egoistic desire for gain in the love of the divine and its creation. The path to realisation of the divine includes creative activity and this creative activity for Tagore was his writing, painting, composing and educating. Thus, Tagore challenges us to discover the creative spirit within us so that we can be better religious and better people.

Tagore is considered as the soul of Bengal—the real rural Bengal. One must know about Tagore in order to know Bengal. Tagore had an indomitable love for God and people. He has written many soul-inspiring, God-oriented songs and poems.

At a time when hatred, divisions and narrow-mindedness have plagued our country and the world, Rabindranath Tagore stands as a symbol of peace and universal fellowship. His religious fervour and insights could be the answer to our troubled world. My attempt to understand Tagore’s vision of religion is to have a personal experience of God, to deepen my faith in God and thus grow as a religious person.



Rabindranath Tagore

(1861-1941)

CHAPTER I

TAGORE: A REMINISCENCE

Tagore occupies a very high pedestal in our country. He received worldwide recognition for his *Gitanjali*, which won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Today, his name evokes in us a sense of wonder and pride. Today, no creative writer, living or dead, is ruling the minds of the people in Bengal more than Rabindranath Tagore. He is perhaps the only poet to whom two different countries owe their national anthems. It is from him that India received her national anthems as also Bangladesh.¹

1.1 A Biographical Sketch

The birth of Rabindranath Tagore on 7 May 1861, in Calcutta, was by no means a great event or a rare happening. He was the fourteenth child of Maharshi Devendranath and Sarada Devi.² His parents, even in their wildest dreams, might not have imagined that their son would one day become an immortal figure in the world of literature.

Tagore had the privilege of being born to the rich parents. His father, Devendranth, was an original thinker and philosopher as well as a man of great honesty and integrity, courage and determination. He had a deep impact on Rabindranath's formative years.³

Moreover, Rabindranath was very fortunate to have inherited a progressive and enlightened family, besides being orthodox and superstitious like other Brahmin families. The family shared an interest in literature and art. The walls and pillars of his home breathed music and it echoed everywhere. Many of his brothers were well-known people of the time. Dwijendranath, the elder brother was a philosopher and prose writer, whereas another one, Jyothindra was an artist. It was a common practice to conduct cultural activities at home and most of the dramas written by anybody at home were staged at home itself. So Rabindranath, from his earliest days, grew up in the one house where all the surging waves of the Indian Renaissance could flow round his daily life, and fill the air he breathed with the exhilaration of their freshness.⁴

¹ Luciano Colussi, ed., *Universality of Tagore* (Calcutta: Don Bosco, 1991), 119.

² Tomy Edacheriparambil, *God-Concept in Gitanjali* (Bangalore: Claretian, 1990), 4.

³ K. R. Salkar, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Impact on Indian Education* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1990),

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⁴ Krishna Kripalani, *Tagore*, trans. K. M. George (Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 1974), 23.

It was a blessing in disguise that Rabindranath was a lonely child. He almost did not have his mother as she was busy with her domestic duties having little time for the child. His father was very austere and busy to come close to the growing child and give him love and affection for which his soul longed. Therefore, the child was mostly looked after by the servants, who did not allow him much freedom. Tagore grew up as a dreaming lonely child, standing by the veranda railing and looking wistfully on the world outside. He remembers very vividly in his book:

We used to be under the rule of the servants. To save themselves trouble they had almost suppressed our right of free movement. But the freedom of not being petted made up even for the harshness of this bondage, for our minds were left clear of the toils of constant coddling, pampering and dressing-up.⁵

Tagore's education began quite early and he was enrolled in various schools in Calcutta as he was not comfortable anywhere. He decided to learn things by himself. He gained a tutor at home, and it seemed to help the development of his versatility. Tagore stopped the formal education with the third form. Though he was a non-conformist at school, he had great admiration for Saraswati, the goddess of art and learning, and he worshipped her. Tagore was fortunate in a way that he never had the kind of academic training which is considered proper for a boy of a respectable family. Thus, to a certain extent, he was free from the influence that ruled young minds of those days, the course of his writings was consequently saved from the groove of imitative forms.⁶

Tagore grew up to be a well-known romantic poet and was an original thinker and a revolutionary in ideas. His poems are equal to a tear or smile which were always a picture of what was taking place within. He had great devotion to the enchanting nature.

Even as a boy, Tagore was very good at observing things, and could get valuable education from the world around him and from the world of nature. He took nothing as ordinary, he went to the beyond and the inner. He tells the story of his ecstasy with which he first saw fresh mornings and unspoiled sunsets in *Reminiscences*:

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 8.

⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of an Artist* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1953), 12.

Every morning, as I awoke, I somehow felt the day coming to me like a new gilt-edged letter, with some unheard-of news awaiting me on the opening of the envelope. And, lest I should lose any fragment of it, I would hurry through my toilet to my chair outside.⁷

1.2 The Influence of Other Religions

Tagore's religion is not a body of written doctrines or theological principles; rather it is something that is inseparable from one's core. He admits that he cannot define it, but he says that the aim of religion is neither idle tranquillity nor the enjoyment of languid beauty. Somehow his mind initially remained coldly aloof, absolutely uninfluenced by any religion whatsoever. When he was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to his life and passed away leaving in his memory a direct message of spiritual reality.⁸

1.2.1 The Influence of the Upanishads

Tagore had been greatly touched by the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha and he has used them in his life as well as in his preaching.⁹ He was born in a family which, at that time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the Upanishads.¹⁰

Tagore reproduces the idea of the immanence of God reflected in the Upanishads. Brahman is the Supreme Reality which makes itself manifest in and through the finite world. Tagore recognises the real spirit of the Upanishads. The Upanishadic seers sacrifice not material prosperity for the attainment of spiritual truth. In order to find him, one must embrace all.¹¹ Tagore follows the Upanishadic understanding of Brahman: Satyam, Jnanam, Anantam (Truth, Knowledge, Infinity). He also discovers the Supreme Being in and through nature. Tagore says, "The first stage of any realisation was through my feeling of intimacy with nature."¹²

⁷ Edacheriparambil, 32.

⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932), 93.

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, Preface, *Sadhana* (London: Macmillan, 1918), viii.

¹⁰ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 91.

¹¹ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 16.

¹² Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 18.

The concept of dualism of self has also been derived from the Upanishads: finite self in human beings which confines to the boundaries of human limitations and divine soul existing within them. The individual divine soul is the manifestation of “Jivan Devata.”

What differentiates Tagore from the Upanishads is his three-fold conception of reality against the Upanishad’s *advaitavada* and *dvaitavada*. Tagore attaches equal importance to humanity, world and God. There is no doubt that he is influenced by the Upanishads, but he has a free integral and independent way of thinking. The Upanishads taught Tagore how human beings can transcend themselves and get a glimpse of the Infinite.

1.2.2 The Bhagavad-Gita

Tagore accepts that the meaning of our self cannot be found in its separateness from God and others, but in the ceaseless realisation of *yoga*, of union. He, therefore, accepts the three *yogas* of the Gita as effective ways of the realisation of the Supreme Being. As in the Gita, he gives importance to action. This is the *karma yoga* of the Gita, the way to be one with the infinite activity by the practice of disinterested goodness, i.e., *nishkama karma*. Tagore’s understanding of God can be traced to Gita’s Supreme Person, Purushothama, far above the level of an average person.

Purushothama pervades this universe; He is the Iswara existing in the hearts of all beings, is within the world and beyond it. This conception of Purushothma in the Gita is unique. The spiritual thoughts found in the Gita present love for God by human being and the love of God for human being. Purushothama is not separate from the world and human beings, is never absent from creation. God is the immanent spirit controlling and guiding everything in the universe. Tagore finds God existing in every form of life.

Tagore discovers God within the life of human being. He says that we know God by realising Him in each and all.¹³ God manifests himself in human beings and all objects and thus realisation is possible within the soul and in nature. For Tagore, too, salvation consists in the integral divine perfection of the whole being of human being.¹⁴

¹³ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 20.

¹⁴ Edacheriparambil, 26-27.

1.2.3 Vaishnavism

Whether there was any influence of Vaishnavism in Tagore's life is debatable since Vaishnavism neglects present life whereas Tagore gives immense value to human life and the world. A divine life on earth is the supreme condition for salvation.

Tagore observes that Vaishnava religion has boldly declared that God has bound himself to human beings, and in that consists the greatest human existence.¹⁵ The possibility of transforming human love into divine love held by Tagore must have been derived from Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism taught Tagore the message of friendly union between God and human being.

Vaishnavites view the world as real with its various colours and combination. They put emphasis on a firm organic relation between God and human being. God is everything and all actions of human being should be dedicated to Him. Tagore was fortunate to have got some lyrical poems of the poets of the Vaishnava sect. This made him aware of some underlying idea deep in the obvious meaning of those love songs. He knew that those poets were speaking about the Supreme Lover, whose touch one experiences in all his relations of love—the love of nature's beauty, of animal, the child, the comrade, the beloved, the love that illuminates his consciousness of reality.¹⁶

1.2.4 Buddhism

What appealed to Tagore is the practical side of Buddha's teaching. Buddha preached the discipline of self-restraint and moral life; it is a complete acceptance of law. His teaching speaks of *nirvana* as the highest end. To understand its real character, one should know the path of its attainment, which is not merely through the negation of evil thoughts and deeds but through the elimination of all limits to love. For Tagore, the path Buddha pointed to was not merely the practice of self-abnegation, but a widening of love and therein lies the true meaning of Buddha's preaching.¹⁷ Tagore does not want to get into the controversy whether Buddhism accepts God or not.

In *The Religion of Man* Tagore says, "Buddha's idea of the infinite is not the spirit of an unbounded cosmic activity, but the infinite whose meaning is in the position of ideal of goodness and love, which cannot be otherwise than human."¹⁸ The bond of unity in

¹⁵ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 115.

¹⁶ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 105.

¹⁷ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

Buddhism is its friendship and the universal love preached by Buddha that has destroyed the barriers that separated human beings from other human beings. Thus, Buddhism also made a deep impact on Tagore because he saw in Buddhism what the role of love and compassion could be.

1.2.5 Christianity

Dr. Aronson, in his book, *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*, says that Tagore seemed to be more Christian than the Christians.¹⁹ Tagore says, “Nobody has exalted man more in every sphere than Jesus. The divinity of man is stressed by Jesus as by Vaishnava saints.”²⁰ Tagore discovers a message of friendly union between God and human being in Christianity. He agrees that like other Indian religions, Christianity, too, proclaims the ideal of selflessness. If Tagore was attracted to Christian theism, it is because it conforms to the ideas which he has already absorbed from the Upanishads and for nothing else. Tagore was a unique, an oriental occidentalist.²¹

1.3 Tagore as a Philosopher

Tagore never had any training in philosophy. Neither did he claim himself to be a philosopher. He only asserted that he is a poet and an artist. Can we, therefore, regard a poet or an artist as a philosopher? If we do, in what sense?

A philosopher tries to explain the basic concepts, assumptions which is known as formulation and clarification of concepts. Philosophers have always asked questions concerning the worth, validity and justification of whatever they are considering.²² If we take this to be the meaning of philosophy, Tagore cannot be classified as a philosopher because his concern has not been to clarify, formulate any concepts.

He, however, deliberates on what a poet should do and what he ought not to do. Tagore thought that a poet should not borrow his medium ready-made from some shop of orthodox respectability. He should have his own seeds and prepare his own soil.²³ Tagore is for freedom and independence of whatever activity humans engage themselves. He

¹⁹ A. Aronson, *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1943), 85.

²⁰ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 52.

²¹ Edacheriparambil, 28.

²² Jaya Mukherjee, *Tagore and Radhakrishnan* (Patna: Janaki, 1992), 5-6.

²³ Tagore, *Reminiscences*, 9.

threw off all restraints and conventions in his poetry, in his novels and in his music. He was a free thinker in his field and in this loose sense, he may be taken as a philosopher.²⁴

The equivalent word for philosophy in Indian term is *darshan*. We refer to the Indian sages or Rishis as philosophers because they themselves in yogic practices or *sadhana* had succeeded in having intuitive grasp of the Reality. If we understand philosophy as *darshan* or vision of Reality, Tagore should be entitled to be called a philosopher. And it is only proper to regard Tagore as a philosopher in the sense that he was a great visionary. His poetry, writings, and speeches are replete with statements which speak of his having such visions. He asserts in clear language:

My religion is essentially poet's religion. Its touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channels as does the inspiration of my music. My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life.²⁵

His poetry, religion and music—all seem to have sprung from his vision. Poetry, music and religion lead to direct encounter with the Reality. The poet is the seeker of beauty and the philosopher aims at finding truth.²⁶ Prof. S. Radhakrishnan considers Tagore's philosophy not as a product of logical intellect but a "sigh of the soul rather than a reasoned account of metaphysics; an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy."²⁷

A philosopher does not have a narrow outlook, rather his approach is broad-minded. This is owing to his knowledge of the Ultimate Reality. He goes beyond the appearance of the things to their essence.²⁸ Tagore is a philosopher in this sense. He is a practical philosopher and thinker, who lives a philosophy. His concern is the deepest values of life. He longs to see things in the light of eternity. His world-view is very comprehensive. Indian philosophers were also very practical. Tagore's philosophy is in tune with those great thinkers who built up the philosophical tradition of our country.

²⁴ Mukherjee, 6.

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *A Poet's Religion*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 25.

²⁶ Mukherjee, 7.

²⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Baroda: Good, 1961), 4.

²⁸ Mukherjee, 8.

CHAPTER II

TAGORE'S NOTION OF RELIGION

Every human being has a unique possession, which he or she calls “his or her religion.” Yet he or she does not know exactly what this means. We only know that we belong to such and such religion. We are convinced that we belong to this religion from our cradle to the grave: this conviction is in all probability not true.

Human beings and animals are being moulded and are taking shape according to their deeply-implanted life-sense. Animals do not need to be aware of this life-sense. Human beings possess an extra awareness that is greater than their material sense—that is, their personhood. It is this deep-abiding creative force which is his religion. Tagore is reluctant to speak about his view of religion. He does not accept any borrowed religion, but what he accepts is his own religion which he reaches through some unseen and trackless channels.²⁹

2.1 Our Need for Religion

Human beings cannot exist without religion, because it is intrinsic in their very nature. The choice is not between religion and no religion, but between this religion or that religion.³⁰ If religion is an essential part of human existence, what are its benefits to human beings? According to Radhakrishnan, the advantages of religion are innumerable. It guarantees values, gives meaning to life, inculcates confidence to go on adventures. Enumerating the advantages of religion, Radhakrishnan says, “Religion is the discipline which touches the conscience and helps us to struggle with evil and sordidness, saves us from greed, lust and hatred, releases moral power, and imparts courage in the enterprise of saving the world.”³¹

Tagore sees that the goal of religion is attaining union with the Infinite. Philosophy is concerned with the knowledge of reality, and the realisation of reality is the concern of religion. Knowing reality implies an intellectual activity and its realisation is

²⁹ Harendra Prasad Sinha, *Religious Philosophy of Tagore and Radhakrishnan* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 3.

³⁰ Sinha, 8.

³¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1947), 42.

religious activity. According to Tagore, reality cannot be known by the intellect. The Infinite has to be realised by the individual in his intuitive experience.³² Intellect is insufficient to unravel truth. Truths are revealed in intuition. God or Brahman cannot be known by debates. Tagore explains this clearly in *Sadhana*:

Intellectual knowledge is partial, because our intellect is an instrument, it is only a part of us, it can give us information about things which can be divided and analysed, and whose properties can be classified, part by part. But Brahma is perfect, and knowledge which is partial can never be a knowledge of him. But he can be known by joy, by love. For joy is knowledge in completeness, it is knowing by our whole being.³³

2.2 The Core of Religion

In Sanskrit, religion is translated as *dharma*, which, in the derivative meaning, implies the principle of relationship that holds us firm, and technically it means the virtue of a thing, the essential quality of it, for example, heat, is the essential quality of fire, though it may be absent in certain stages. Tagore says, “The ‘wateriness’ of water is essentially its religion, in the spark of the flame lies the religion of fire. Likewise, man’s religion is his innermost truth.”³⁴ Religion lies in the endeavour of human beings to cultivate and express those qualities which are inherent in the human nature and to have faith in themselves. These qualities are not absolutely natural in individuals and therefore, religion has a purpose.³⁵

2.3 Characteristics of Religion

Tagore envisages some special characteristics of religions. Religion requires a reference to the beyond. Human beings are not satisfied with being confined to the present but they have a capacity of going beyond themselves towards higher regions. The inherent truth within human beings drives them beyond themselves. According to Tagore:

³² Mukherjee, 46.

³³ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 159.

³⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *A Tagore Testament*, trans. Indu Dutta (London: Meridian, 1953), 37.

³⁵ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 143-44.

Consciously or unconsciously we have in our life this feeling of the 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 realisation of truth ever leaves it stranded on the desert of finality, but carries it to a region beyond.³⁶

This reference to the beyond is the essential element in religious longing. We cannot realise the wholeness of our existence by confining to the limited existence, our place in the Infinite. We need to constantly exercise our capacity of self-transcendence.

Religion also includes a sense of humanness in it. Religion is an expression of the essential and inner aspect of human beings. It is this human aspect which forms the backbone of religion. Religion calls for the acceptance of the spiritual. Religion is the “spiritual truth.” The core of religion is spirituality. Our religion essentially makes us aware of the communion which is beyond the physical universe. This guides us to put faith in a spiritual order.

2.4 Religion Is Not Asceticism

Some people may be tempted to think that religion is an escape from the world and it does not allow them to be in touch with the pains and sufferings of the world. Religion, for Tagore, is not an escape from the world. Tagore does not favour asceticism and he goes to the extent of saying that deliverance cannot be achieved in renunciation. He says, “Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. / I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.”³⁷ He goes on to say that he will never shut the doors of his senses. This is because the delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear God’s delight to him.³⁸ One has to develop a sense of affinity with everything and this can be possible only when one is devoted to the duties and responsibilities of the world.

2.5 True Religion

Tagore vehemently asserts that institutional religions are false and dogmatic. There is a difference between true religion and false religion. True religion is

³⁶ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 52.

³⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

characterised by the qualities of naturality and spontaneity in it. It is free and spontaneous in every individual. It has no boundaries around itself. According to Tagore, true religion preaches freedom, whereas religious organisations make religions a slave of their own institutions. True religion, therefore, must not be confused with institutional religions. Tagore prefers to call true religion as poet's religion because a poet is a free thinker. He revels in flights of imagination without any constraint. Therefore, he says that in a dogmatic religion all questions are answered and all doubts are laid to rest. But the poet's religion is fluid, like the atmosphere around the earth where light and shadow play hide and seek. It never leads anybody anywhere to any solid conclusion; yet it reveals endless spheres of light, because it has no walls around itself.³⁹

Religion for Tagore must be free from all constraints. It must allow people to grow and develop. Poetry is Tagore's religion because it gives free play to his spirit. He has communication with God through Nature. Tagore's poetry embodies his joy, his delight which he experiences in such communion with the reality.

2.6 The Religion of *Gitanjali*

The lyrics of *Gitanjali* represent a very simple religion, one that is characterised by sound relationship with the divine rather than by external paraphernalia. The religion of *Gitanjali* is free from pedantic dogmas and high metaphysics. It does not have any complicated rites and rituals. Its worship is not of the Pharisee but of the simple man of the wayside. This religion considers the world outside; the man in the neighbourhood, longs to worship the divine in the day-to-day activities of life.⁴⁰

The central theme of *Gitanjali* is devotional: it expresses the yearning of the devotee for the reunion with the divine. We get many instance of such poetry in *Gitanjali*, for example the opening song:

Thou has made me endless, such is
thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou
emptiest again and again, and fillest it
ever with fresh life.⁴¹

³⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 16.

⁴⁰ Edacheriparambil, 77.

⁴¹ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 1.

This is an acknowledgement that the human soul has no significance unless it is filled by the Supreme. Birth and death nothing but the emptying and filling of the soul by the Supreme Soul and the individual in this way shares God's endless life, His immortality.

The human body is the temple of God; so it needs to be kept pure. Since God dwells in the inmost shrine of the heart, one has to keep away all evils from one's heart. Our effort should be to reveal God in our actions because it is God who gives us the power to act.⁴² This is true worship.

In our relationship with the divine what is important is the total self-surrender so that we may accept God as everything. A humble devotee prays:

This is my prayer to thee, my Lord—
strike, strike at the root of penury
in my heart.

Give me the strength lightly to bear
my joys and sorrows.

Give me the strength to make my
love fruitful in service.

Give me the strength never to disown
the poor or bend me knees before
insolent might

Give me the strength to raise my
mind high above daily trifles;

And give me the strength to surrender
my strength to thy will with love.⁴³

Tagore is very critical with regard to the existential ritualism. The religion that does not have any concern for one's fellow beings, and the offerings that bar others their basic need, is useless. Lyric eleven exposes the uselessness of religious rituals. It tells that true worship of God consists not in the performance of rites and ceremonies, but extending a helping hand to the suffering and the needy.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 3-4.

⁴³ Ibid., 28-29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

Gitanjali also warns us to be cautious in our relationship with the world. In the beginning the attachment to the world may not be a hindrance for our worship of God but time may come when the things of the world may occupy everything of our life leaving aside God. Tagore expresses this in *Gitanjali* as:

I thought I could outdo everybody in
the world in wealth and power, and I
amassed in my own my own treasure-house the
money due to my king.⁴⁵

God's dwelling place is among the poorest and lowliest. It is difficult for a proud person to approach where God is in clothes amidst the meanest of society. God is present in every other, in the simplest and the meekest. Lyric ten reveals God's dwelling place:

HERE is thy footstool and there rest
thy feet where live the poorest, and
lowliest, and lost.⁴⁶

Gitanjali also advocates a universal fellowship. The simplest way of worship is to stand before God face to face with folded hands. Tagore prepares us to welcome death when it comes gladly. He expresses that death is the last fulfilment of life, "O THOU the last fulfilment of life, Death, / my death, come and whisper to me!"⁴⁷ He further says that he will offer all the sweet vintage of his autumn days and summer nights, all the earnings and gleanings of his busy life.

2.7 Religion and Reality

Tagore's conception of religion springs from his conception of reality. He believes that the finite, imperfect self is real but the underlying infinite and the perfect self are much more real, hence the religion of human being is the realisation of this perfect self or the Infinite. Tagore also affirms that diversity is quite true but there is a unity which is truer which we discover behind diversity. Tagore tells the purpose of our existence, "The

⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

individual man must exist for Man the great, and must express him in disinterested works, in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship.”⁴⁸

This is his religion which is at work in the heart of all. It finds expression in various forms and ways. He knows and makes use of this world where it is endless and thus attains greatness, but he realises his own truth where it is perfect and thus finds his fulfilment. It is clear thus that to Tagore, religion is the breath of life. For him there is no defined religion of any particular church or creed, but it is one that illumines all religions. It bestows its divine light to show the real value of things, it is the source of human being’s deepest longings and aspirations, and it makes death beautiful. His every thought is dominated by the consciousness of God, and this consciousness pervades his being, bringing his mind into a perpetual attitude of worship. He does not put aside other things from his life. His senses are renewed in a new form that appreciates all things that surround him.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 17.

⁴⁹ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 94.

CHAPTER III

TAGORE'S CONCEPTION OF GOD, HUMAN BEING AND THE WORLD

Tagore believes God, nature and self to be inseparable aspects of reality. They are essentially the same. He says, "If this universe is not the manifestation of a Person, then it is a stupendous deception and perpetual insult to him."⁵⁰ Hence, for Tagore, the world is not unreal or *maya*. It is as real as Reality because it is the manifestation of Reality.

3.1 God

He believes in God as a person, who is at the root of the world as well as of ourselves. Tagore can be regarded as a theistic philosopher because he believes that Reality is God and God is Reality. His philosophy is monotheistic. He believes in one God as the Ultimate Reality. Reality has to be realised in experience. The grasp of reality is possible by intuition. Because of this view of Tagore, some writers like Dr. Jaya Mukherjee brand him as an intuitionist.⁵¹

Tagore thinks that God cannot be comprehended by logic and reason. His existence can be felt within, inwardly realised. He can feel the touch of the Infinite but cannot comprehend the Infinite. Thus, he emphasises the personal realisation of God rather than proving the existence of God by way of proofs. It must be noted that, for Tagore, it is not essential to try to demonstrate the existence of God.

3.1.1 Proofs for God's Existence

It is impossible to think of proving the existence of God because our reason and logic are insufficient to know God. However, Prof. V.S. Naravane identifies some passages in Tagore's works suggestions and hints reminiscent of the traditional proof of God's existence—the moral, the causal, the teleological and the ontological arguments.⁵² Tagore sees God behind creation because a finite being cannot be the cause of the world.

⁵⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality*, (London: Macmillan, 1933), 71.

⁵¹ Mukherjee, 10.

⁵² V.S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1967), 125.

The Causal Argument can be found at various places. Tagore says the mere finite “is a dead wall obstructing the beyond. This knowledge merely accumulates but does not illuminate. It is like a lamp without its light, a violin without its music.”⁵³ Tagore here infers the existence of God as Infinite from the insufficiency of the finite as finite.

The most important evidence for the existence of God which is repeatedly found in the writings of Tagore is teleological proof. In *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Jnardan, one of the characters says, “But look at the nice order and regularity prevailing all over the place—how do you explain it without a king.”⁵⁴ Another reference to this argument is made in the *Creative Unity*. He says that this world is a creation and in its centre there is a living idea, which reveals itself in an eternal symphony played on innumerable instruments, all echoing perfect tunes.⁵⁵ These references indicate that Tagore feels that the examples of order and harmony that are found in the universe impel us to believe in a creator—a being capable of creating this ordered cosmos. That indicates that there is principle of unity—a God-behind-creation who is ultimately responsible for the unity prevailing in creation.

Tagore sees another evidence for God’s existence in the fact of joy inherent in every aspect of creation. Every individual has within him the capacity to feel this joy.⁵⁶ This is difficult to explain unless the creator himself is believed to be the living principle of joy. Pure joy appears to Tagore as having no other explanation except the fact that it is divine.⁵⁷

God is also presupposed as the object of love, hope and aspirations. Tagore feels that certain basic urges of ours require satisfaction and also explanation. These urges can have no explanation other than the explanation in terms of the Supreme. Nobody can deny that we, at times, especially on some crucial moments of our life, feel a dire need of some super-human solace and hope and strength.⁵⁸ Religions came into existence merely to satisfy human needs. This restlessness, this longing for the unknown is definitely a fact. There must be an object of this longing, and our explanation would be insufficient if that

⁵³ Tagore, *Personality*, 56.

⁵⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *The King of the Dark Chamber* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 19.

⁵⁵ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, 35.

⁵⁶ Lal, 55.

⁵⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Fruit Gathering* (Calcutta: Macmillan, 1971), 27.

⁵⁸ Lal, 56.

object is just a finite or ordinary object, because the longing is for the extra-ordinary, the super-human. Unless we believe in this we cannot explain this longing satisfactorily.

3.1.2 The Nature of God

Tagore asserts that the Supreme has to be a person. He tries his best to show that this would, in no way, imply any limitation or imperfection on the part of God.⁵⁹

In order to substantiate his viewpoint, he quotes from the Upanishads and the Vedas, which, according to him, give due credence to the personality of God. He says Reality can be regarded as “personality acting upon personalities through incessant manifestations.”⁶⁰ He also says, “Reality is the expression of personality, like a poem, like a work of art.”⁶¹ This does not mean, however, the divine personality is exactly similar to human personality. Tagore asserts the similarity between the two and yet feels that there is a difference. Divine personality stands for the highest and the best that humanity strives for but does not attain. Tagore believes that personality does not necessarily imply finitude. Personality is a limitation only, if it is by conception a limited personality. If personality itself is thought of as the supreme—as infinite the question of its limitation does not arise.

The notion of God as an impersonal entity does not appeal to him. Tagore feels that a Brahmana, who stares at people with frozen eyes, regardless of their selfless devotion and silent suffering, does not appeal to our religious instinct. He feels that God has to be brought nearer to man. One can take interest in God only when He is humanised. What is the use of worshipping a God, who has no feeling at all?

3.1.3 God is Love

Although this assertion seems to be similar to the Christian assertion of God as love, the fact is that for Tagore this statement is not so much Christian as Vaishnava.⁶² The emphasis given here is not so much on service or compassion but on “devotion” and “surrender.” Metaphysically, both the Christian and the Vaishnava thinkers may ultimately mean the same thing when they say “God is love.” But Tagore speaks about an emotional realisation of oneness which will lead to an extension of consciousness beyond

⁵⁹ Sinha, 25.

⁶⁰ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, 35.

⁶¹ Tagore, *Personality*, 69.

⁶² Sinha, 27.

the narrow limits of the self.⁶³ Therefore, the statement “God is love” means that God is the ultimate hope and source of strength to human being. God becomes a being with whom an emotional relationship can be established and through whom life can derive sustenance and solace.⁶⁴

It is on account of this emphasis that the world itself is seen as “creation out of joy.” If God is love, participation in His creation is participation in His loving act. That is how, creation itself becomes an act of joy and the feeling of the “burden of existence” is redeemed to a very great extent.

3.1.4 The Jivan-Devata

Jivan-Devata or the Lord of life is an intense personal naming of God, who transcends the poet’s self.⁶⁵ In his philosophy, God in some way or the other has been humanised. Humanisation of God does not just mean that God is God of humanity, but also it means that it is the God in human being. Describing God in himself, he calls God his Jivan-Devata.

As Jivan-Devata is the divine present in the human being, they are identical. However, this relation is not one of complete and unqualified identity, because Jivan-Devata is God in human being. Tagore perceives no inconsistency in this relation of identity-in-difference, because it is possible to comprehend such a relation even in ordinary experience, as for example, in the experience of love. Thus, though Jivan-Devata is God in human being, God cannot be called merely Jivan-Devata. For Tagore the Infinite Being seeks expression through the human ideal.

Jivan-Devata is not exactly God, but rather his own higher self—not the universal consciousness, but a special centre of that consciousness. When man comes into contact with the Infinite Being, he discovers there the source of his creativity. This inner principle of creativity is called Jivan-Devata or the Lord of my life by Tagore.⁶⁶

3.1.5 The Absolute and God

In metaphysics, there is a distinction drawn between God and the Absolute. Tagore does not make any distinction of this kind. He uses the terms “the Absolute” and “God” interchangeably. Tagore addresses God by various names, such as “The Universal

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Edacheriparambil, 34.

⁶⁶ Sinha, 28.

Man,” “The Supreme Man,” “The Supreme Spirit,” “The Infinite Personality.” He does away with the distinction between “Absolute” and “God.” This distinction, according to him, does not have any objective basis, but is rooted in the varying attitudes of different men.⁶⁷ As a philosopher, he does not discard the absolutistic view. Like the Vaishnavas, he maintains in the Upanishadic strain that the finites are created by the Infinite out of His own endless joy and love.⁶⁸

Although he appears to be assimilating both theism and absolutism, the theistic side gets the upper hand in his thinking. He is much more concerned with God and takes the Absolute as His secondary aspect. God has two aspects—personal and impersonal. The Absolute is the impersonal aspect of God. So Tagore’s God is not a featureless, attributeless, impersonal unity but a person essentially related to human being as lover to the beloved. Naturally, God is conceived as greater than His impersonal aspect which is called the Absolute. It is the creative joy of the Infinite that gives birth to the finite. Most Indian thinkers take God as the empirical, ephemeral and finite aspect of the Absolute. But Tagore conceives God as a person and as the concrete ideal of human life, and its aspirations. The reason behind accepting a personal God is that a human being cannot grasp a reality which is unapproachable. People can take interest in the Absolute only when it is realised in human experience, only when it is humanised.

3.2 Human Being

Tagore sees human beings in such a manner that without affecting the goodness of God, he gives human beings a special dignity and uniqueness. Tagore is often called a philosopher of humanity. This may be on account of the fact that in his philosophy human beings occupy a very high status. Metaphysically speaking, they are God-like in many respects and yet they are very much a creature of this world.⁶⁹

Human being has been viewed as the crown of creation. Tagore tries to give importance to both the physical and the spiritual aspect of human beings. Tagore never degrades the status of human being. To him human being is at the apex of creation. He writes:

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸ Mukherjee, 12

⁶⁹ Lal, 61-62.

Man, as a creation, represents the Creator, and this is why of all creatures it has been possible for him to comprehend this world in his knowledge and in his feeling and in his imagination, to realise in his individual spirit a union with the Spirit that is everywhere.⁷⁰

Human being is an infinite-finite being one and at the same time. In other words, Tagore sees the infinite-finite nature of the finite individual. He, however, does not mean that human being is primarily a finite being who rises to realise the infinity. He does not speak of ascending from the finite state to the infinite. Rather, he believes in the divine principle at work in human being. The divine principle is not to be found outside human beings. It is in them.

Human beings are persons and, therefore, they have to realise their personality. Tagore says further that human beings are not mere facts like pieces of stone, but persons. Therefore, we are not content with drifting along the stream of circumstance. We have a central ideal of love with which to harmonise our existence, we have to manifest a truth in our life, which is the perfect relationship with the Eternal Person.⁷¹

In today's world where women are regarded as second class, Tagore holds the view that man and woman are organically related as the complementary functions of one whole. Tagore addresses the problem of woman in his *Personality*. If we analyse the two aspects of life, rest and movement or being and becoming, the predominating aspect in the woman's nature is being. Our domestic life and everything which is personal and human belongs to woman. The domestic world is the world where we find our worth as individuals, therefore, our value is not the market value, but the value of love that God in His infinite mercy has set upon all His creatures.⁷²

3.2.1 The Finite Aspect of Human Nature

Human beings are finite beings and they are thus dependent on nature. But there is the infinite in them that builds the world and rules over it. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore says, "As an animal, he (man) is still dependent upon Nature, as a man, he is sovereign who builds his world and rules it."⁷³ Human beings are very much like animals. They are

⁷⁰ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 103.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷² Tagore, *Personality*, 177.

⁷³ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 44.

influenced and determined by the environment surrounding them. They have the instinct of self-preservation within them and they are guided by the motive of self-satisfaction. Secondly, human beings as finite-beings are superior to other living beings. They refuse to accept and surrender to the forces of nature like other living beings. They evolve methods for controlling them and so they are superior to the other finite beings even as a finite self. Thirdly, human beings, as social beings, have a feeling of sympathy for others. They are not satisfied by their own attainments. They actually help others to rise and realise the unity. This is termed as “yearning of the finite self.” They relentlessly try to excel themselves in every field.

Finally, though human beings are finite beings, they feel a peculiar satisfaction in maintaining their uniqueness. They are always eager to show themselves as distinctly superior to other beings.

Thus, the finite aspect of human being is embodied self with the instinct of self-preservation and self-acquisition. It should be borne in mind that though the finite aspect of human beings represents the inferior, the lower nature of human beings, it is not unreal. There are philosophers who have taken the body to be unreal. On the contrary, Tagore does not believe in this, what he believes is this, that in the finite self lies the root of the infinite. It is the finite that grows and develops into the infinite. Therefore, it is not proper to think that the finite in human beings is in conflict with the infinite in them. They go together.

3.2.2 The Infinite Aspect of Human Nature

Tagore calls the infinite aspect of human being by various terms like the universal in human being, the surplus in human being, the element of divinity in humans and so on. It is very difficult to describe that exact nature of the infinite-in-human being. Tagore realises the difficulty of explaining human nature and takes recourse to illustrations. In *Personality* he states:

We have seen men conquering pain by undaunted prowess, plunging into fiery ordeals only to march forward with triumph. What striving is this? This power that lies behind is neither physical nor mental, it belongs to the inward self where man is united with his God.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Tagore, *Personality*, 38.

The infinite in human beings ceaselessly strives for achieving higher and higher goals. There is no goal which can be said to be final for them. Once they achieve a goal, they are persuaded to go ahead. There is no task which they regard to be impossible. This element present within them is the infinite in them or the surplus in human beings. Because of this, human beings are found to be making constant attempts to achieve what appears to be absurd or impossible.

The element of creativity in human beings also gives evidence of their infinite nature. By creativity Tagore does not understand the mere capacity to construct something new. Creativity for him is the capacity of giving expression to novel ideas. It is the power of having new and original visions. Though human beings are finite selves, there is an inherent creative capacity in them to express themselves in new and fresh ways.

Another important characteristic that constitute the infinite in human being is freedom, freedom to go beyond the limits of the finite body and to aspire for realisation of the universal within the individual.

The yearning for immortality present in every individual is a testimony of the infinite in human being. It is only human beings who aspire for immortality. They know that death is inevitable and yet they have the feeling that death is not the end of life. Many of their actions are based on this conviction. What is it in human being that asserts its immortality in spite of the obvious fact of death? It cannot be the result of mere physical body or mental power. Tagore thinks that it is the personality of human being.⁷⁵

Tagore's study of the Upanishads has convinced him that reality is of the nature of joy.⁷⁶ The infinite in humans, therefore, must be joy. This, perhaps, according to him, is the most basic character of the infinite in human being. Truth, beauty and goodness are the expressions of joy. We feel joy when we cling to the truth. By being good people, we feel joy. Beauty gives us joy. In all these states we forget the worries and anxieties of life. It is joy that makes us moral or religious. Joy is the condition of our spiritual growth. Joy is our ultimate goal. When we become slaves of our body, our joy is reduced. When we rise above the body and enjoy the higher aspects of life, our joy increases. Joy, thus, constitutes the higher—the spiritual aspect, the infinite in human being. Tagore calls this infinite aspect of human being *Jivan Devata*—the Lord of life. It is the Lord because it

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mukherjee, 26.

gives us the joy of existence. Jivan Devata is the element of divinity present in people. It is the element which makes them God-like.

Thus, we see that the bodily nature is the finite side of human beings and the infinite aspect in them is what is said to be soul in common parlance. Body is not an illusory or false aspect of human life. It is conceived as “the temple of divine.” The temple is not to be mistaken for the divine. For attaining the divine we must withdraw our concentration from the temple of the divine. Body has a reality of its own. It represents lower aspect of human nature. It has to be transcended for attaining the higher nature. We should view the body as an aspect of the Infinite and not as independent of the Infinite. Our life is a constant search for the Infinite, according to Tagore.⁷⁷

3.2.3 Human Being as Spiritual

Human beings are finite in their expression and infinite in their principle.⁷⁸ They are considered “earth’s children but heaven’s heirs.” This picture of human beings remains a spiritual picture, and yet it differs significantly from the one drawn by the ancient Indian thinkers. Unlike them, the emphasis here is not only on “infinity” but also on “finiteness.” Both constitute the being of an individual, Tagore feels that any exclusive emphasis, on the infinite aspect of human being, will make the picture of him or her unrealistic. Human beings, according to him, are growing in and through the processes of evolution, and that they are doing not by annihilating their existential and biological aspects, but by realising ‘more’ than what these aspects can provide. This emphasis on “more” is not denying the reality of the aspects that are there but apprehending the reality that is not yet evident to the present ways of apprehension.

With the appearance of human beings, the course of evolution changes from “determination” to “freedom.” Tagore says, “Before the chapter ended Man appeared and turned the course of this evolution from an indefinite march of physical aggrandisement to a freedom of more subtle perfection.”⁷⁹ This change, according to Tagore, is also attributed to the presence of “surplus” in human being by which they go beyond themselves. Tagore, recognising the spiritual character, says, “The most important fact that has come into prominence along with the change of direction in our evolution, is the possession of a Spirit which has its enormous capital with a surplus far in excess of the

⁷⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 119.

⁷⁸ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 81.

⁷⁹ Tagore, *Religion of Man*, 14.

requirements of the biological animal in Man.”⁸⁰ This fact of “the surplus” which characterises the essence of human beings, speaks of their spirituality. It is because of the surplus that people transcend their present possessions, and are capable of reaching spiritual heights.

Moreover, unlike animals human beings do not surrender to the blind forces of nature, but take them as a “challenge” to their capacity. They have the power to face them, and even to control or subdue them. For example, if a river obstructs their path, they construct a bridge over it or again if a mountain tends to block their movements, they build a tunnel running through it. Thus, this capacity can also be taken as an evidence of their spiritual propensity.

The greatest evidence of human beings’ spiritual nature lies in their “yearnings” for *mukti*. No other creature ever bothers for the hereafter. It is human beings alone who have been able to realise that the short span of life cannot be the “whole” of existence. This realisation has impelled them to explore the nature of their ultimate destiny, has led them to lead life much above the life of just sensuous existence. That speaks of their spiritual nature.

3.2.4 Characteristics of Human Being: Soul and Body

Roughly speaking, “body” represents the finite side of human existence and “soul” stands for the infinite aspect of human nature. Just as Tagore believes in the reality of both these aspects, he believes that both the soul and the body are real.

Tagore never suggests that the body is an illusory or false aspect of human life. On the other hand, it has been conceived as the temple of the divine. But, as this analogy also suggests, a distinction has to be made between “the temple” and “the divine.” We must not make the mistake of mistaking the temple for the divine. The temple may have a reality of its own, but in order to realise the divine, attention has to be withdrawn from the temple to the divine.

So, Tagore says that although body has a reality of its own, we must remember that it only represents the lower aspect of human nature which has to be transcended in order to attain the higher nature—that of the soul.

The body, thus, can be viewed in two ways. If we give exclusive emphasis on the body, we are imprisoning the soul in the body. The body in that sense may be compared with a “jewelled chain” which may be beautiful to look at, but which is a “chain” all the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43.

same. But, if we view the body as providing an occasion and a base for spiritual discipline, body becomes an aspect of the game of joy that human being has to play. In lyric forty-nine of *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, Tagore says that heaven is fulfilled in your our body and in your palpitating heart.⁸¹ If we lay emphasis on the body, the soul encompassed in the body is lost sight of. But if we view the body as an aspect of the Infinite, even the body becomes a partner in the joyous game of the spirit.

3.3 World

In every theistic religion, one finds some mention of the world. It must be borne in mind that any attempt to determine the nature of the world is the realm of metaphysics; but in religious metaphysics, the world is created by the creator. Therefore, we need to establish the precise relationship between the two in a proper sense.

In the Tagorean philosophy, the concept of the world has an importance of its own, because he makes a constant attempt to emphasise that the scientific conception of nature is compatible with his conception of the world and therefore it is possible to reconcile the “reality of the created world” with the “oneness of the One.”

3.3.1 The Background

From his childhood, Tagore has been fascinated by the overwhelming charm of nature and this fascination eventually led him to develop a powerful philosophy of the world. Nature is not merely an object of aesthetic joy to him but also dynamic and full of life, bubbling with energy. He had established a kinship with nature. Therefore he says, “This world was living to me, intimately close to my life, permeated by a subtle touch of kinship which enhanced the value of my own being.”⁸²

Tagore had a great love and reverence for nature. He calls nature “the most sacred place for pilgrimage.” He says that a road, for example, may be looked upon from two different points of view. It can be regarded either as dividing human beings from the object of their attainment or leading them to their goal. Likewise, there are two ways of viewing nature also, and Tagore is for the latter point of view.⁸³ Tagore says that we are in a harmonious relationship with nature and we can think because our thoughts are also

⁸¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Lover's Gift and Crossing* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 49.

⁸² Tagore, *Religion of Man*, 99.

⁸³ Sinha, 44.

in harmony with things. We can use the forces of nature for our purpose only because our power is in harmony with the universal power. But in the long run our purpose can knock against the purpose which works through nature.⁸⁴ This not only explains Tagore's great emphasis on "love of Nature" but also gives clue to his philosophy of the world.

He does not make any distinction between "world" and "nature," rather he uses them interchangeably in his philosophy. We notice the expressions such as "world," "nature," "*prakirti*," "*jagat*" and so on. Occasionally, he also uses the term "*prithvi*."

Tagore, in a sense, asserts the reality of the world. He believes that the world has both a justification and significance, hence it has to be accepted as real.⁸⁵ Moreover, it is through a realisation of kinship with the world that redemption becomes possible. This justifies Tagore's effort to build a philosophy of the world.

3.3.2 Nature

Tagore conceives the world as spiritual in character. He says that if our acquaintance with nature does not lead us deeper than science, we will never understand what a person with spiritual vision finds in these natural phenomena. For example, the water does not merely cleanse our limbs, but it purifies our heart; for it touches our soul. The earth does not merely hold our body, but it gladdens our mind; for its contact is more than a physical contact—it is a living presence. When we do not realise our kinship with the world, we live in a prison-house whose walls are alien to us. When we meet the eternal spirit in all objects, then we are emancipated, for then we discover the fullest significance of the world into which we are born; then we find ourselves in perfect truth, and our harmony with the all is established.⁸⁶

Another thing that indicates the spirituality of the world is the tremendous harmony revealed in it. We find an order in the universe. The apparent diversities and disharmonies do not disturb the harmony of the world. Tagore sees a bond of harmony between our two eyes, which makes them act in unison. Similarly, there is unbreakable continuity of relation in the physical world between heat and cold, light and darkness, motion and rest, as between bass and treble notes of a piano. It is because of these that opposites do not bring confusion in the universe, but harmony.⁸⁷ Tagore makes a

⁸⁴ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 6.

⁸⁵ Sinha, 44.

⁸⁶ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 8.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

comparison between the world and a perfect work of art. He, time and again, describes the world as a “song,” and calls it an “expression of beauty.” The world can be clearly understood in the analogy of a symphony, with different musical instruments playing their separate tunes and yet producing a harmonious music. Similarly, the different objects of the world produce a unity of the world. He says, “We find that the endless rhythms of the world are not merely constructive; they strike our own heart-strings and produce music.”⁸⁸ The universe is, thus, an outstanding piece of art produced by the “Eternal master artist.”

One unique feature that can be noticed in Tagore’s philosophy of the world is that his creationism, instead of contradicting evolutionism, incorporates it. According to him, the higher forms of life develop from lower ones, without any “sudden unaccountable break.” His book, *The Religion of Man*, begins with the theory of evolution, which unfolds the potentialities of life. While describing the evolution, he makes us see how light, as the radiant energy of creation, started its ring dance in atoms and how life was brought into the arena in the tiniest little monocycle of a cell⁸⁹ and with its gifts of growth and power of adaptation contradicted the meaninglessness of their bulk. He adds, “It was made conscious not of the volume but of the value of existence.”⁹⁰ With the advent of man the course of evolution changes “from an indefinite march of physical aggrandisement of a freedom of a more subtle perfection.”⁹¹

Tagore is also aware of the drawbacks of evolutionism and he says that it works well only after it is given a start. In other words, it cannot explain the origin of the universe satisfactorily. Therefore, Tagore holds on to the theory of creation. Harping upon this drawback, Harendra Prasad Sinha says, “Even Darwin who claimed to give a very thoroughgoing explanation of the living beings, could not account for the first appearance of life. That is why, Tagore also adheres to the theory of creation.”⁹²

Tagore is of the opinion that God has created the world out of joy. He says, “His manifestation in creation is out of his fullness of joy. It is the nature of this abounding joy

⁸⁸ Tagore, *Creative Unity*, 35.

⁸⁹ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹² Sinha, 46.

to realise itself in form which is law. The joy, which is without form, must create, must translate itself into forms.”⁹³

3.3.3 *Maya*

It is the problem of every theistic account of the universe because it conceives God as the Ultimate one. If God is so conceived, there arises “why” with respect to creation. Tagore heavily relies on the ancient Indian thought and introduces this concept more or less in the Vedantic mode.⁹⁴ Though the concept of *maya* has been taken from the Vedanta, it has been conceived in the light of Tagore’s conception of the nature of creation. *Maya*, similar to Vedanta, has been conceived as the principle that brings about the appearance of creation. *Maya*, for Tagore, is ignorance on a universal scale, it is the “principle of the cosmic error.” Truth, according to Tagore, stands for unity. *Maya* stands for separateness.

In order to explain the nature of *maya*, Tagore uses an analogy.⁹⁵ A savage gets some bank notes from somewhere. He does not know their value, and so they are completely useless to him. On the other hand, for a wiseman, who considers the bank notes in relation to the bank, they have a value. Similarly, if creation is viewed as the work of the creator, then there appears a value in creation. If, on the other hand, the world is viewed independently and apart from Him, then the Universe will not appear to have any significance for us. This is *maya*—the tendency to see from the wrong point of view.

Maya is a name for the tendency to treat the universe as an independent unit. It is not a separate entity. It neither can exist by itself nor can it limit God’s infinity. To make this point clear, Tagore makes use of the analogy of a chess player. The chess player puts certain restrictions with regard to the movement of chess-man. These restrictions are self-imposed, otherwise there would not be any play. These restrictions again are put for the sake of joy—for making the game, a game of joy. Likewise, God also has to put certain limits to his will in order to make creation, a creation of joy. Tagore says, “If God assumes his role of omnipotence, then his creation is at an end and his power loses all its meaning. For power to be a power must act within limits.”⁹⁶ This self-imposed limitation

⁹³ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 104.

⁹⁴ Sinha, 46.

⁹⁵ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 80.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

is *maya*. “It is like a father’s settling upon his son some allowance within the limit of which he is free to do what he likes.”⁹⁷

At times, Tagore tends to use the expression *maya* as denoting appearance. He makes a distinction between appearance and unreality. It is reality that appears, and therefore appearance is appearance of the reality. Therefore, Tagore treats appearance as an aspect of truth. He says, when we “deprive truth of its appearance it loses the best part of its reality. For appearance is a personal relationship; it is for me.”⁹⁸

This shows that the principle of *maya* is not altogether an illusory principle or delusion. Tagore gives to this principle a reality of its own. It is, in a sense, a power of God. Only this has to be remembered that its reality is like the reality of error. It has a reality, but it has to be superseded. “Error, by its nature cannot be stationary, it cannot remain with truth, like a tramp it must quit its lodging as soon as it fails to pay its score to the full.”⁹⁹ In his attempt to distinguish Tagore’s conception of *maya* from that of Shankara, P.T. Raju says that according to Shankara, *maya* neither *is* nor *is not*, while according to Tagore, it both *is* and *is not*.¹⁰⁰ It is because it is a fact of experience—an appearance, it *is* not because for the ultimate apprehension of reality it has to be transcended.

Maya can also give us knowledge, but that is not final knowledge, one needs to transcend or to go beyond to attain the final realisation. Thus Tagore rightly says, in *Stray Birds*, that the mystery of creation is like the darkness of night—it is great. Delusions of knowledge is like the morning fog.¹⁰¹ The darkness of the fog cannot be profound as the darkness of the night. That is why, *maya* is called the mist and not the sun. The sun, here, signifies the sun of ultimate knowledge which can remove the darkness of the night of ignorance by piercing through the mysteries of creation.

3.3.4 Degrees of Reality

Tagore seems to believe in what is known in Western metaphysics as the degrees of reality. Although it is not fare to equate his ideas with the British Idealists, more or less

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Tagore, *Personality*, 51.

⁹⁹ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ P.T. Raju, *Idealistic Thought of India* (London: George Allen, 1953), 328.

¹⁰¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 4.

like them, he also speaks of degrees in the realm of creation.¹⁰² This creation clearly expresses the forms of gradation. All the aspects of creation are not equal. Some of the aspects are inferior compared to others. In his poetic fashion, Tagore compares the different aspects of creation with the various strings of a musical instrument, and says that some strings are of inferior tone and some of superior tone. He invariably describes man as the golden string of the divine instrument, that is, creation. This sort of description creates the impression that whatever forms the universe contains are graded according to their resemblances to reality.

Many of the scholars seem to be in agreement in saying that Tagore believes in the degrees of reality. The Supreme has been conceived as the unity of manifold. The most frequently used analogy for this is that of music. Music comprehends diverse notes but each note in itself cannot be called music. Similarly, God is everything, but we cannot say everything is God. God is everything but everything is not God. God has many strings in his sitar, some are made of iron, other of copper and yet others are made of gold. God plays a beautiful music out of these strings.

This makes clear that Tagore does believe in the fact of gradation. He believes that some aspects of the world are superior and some inferior. On many occasions Tagore talks about the superiority of human being over other aspects of creation. For example, the worm is superior to the clod, the animal is superior to the worm, and human being is superior to them all. Tagore, at times, describes human being as the golden string of God's sitar. It is on account of their superiority that human beings resemble their creator in many respects and are able to organise their affairs consciously.

However, it must be borne in mind that the question of the degrees of reality would be relevant to the realm of creation only and not to the realm of the Supreme. The Supreme is one and therefore, the question of something being less or more in it does not arise. It is only in the realm of creation that something appears to be more akin to the reality proper and something as less similar to it. Thus, it is in the context of creation that we can talk of any kind of gradation or of something being more real than another.

¹⁰² Sinha, 47.

CHAPTER IV

SIN, SUFFERING, DEATH, REBIRTH AND LIBERATION

The fateful morning of December 26, 2004, saw the devastating gigantic tsunami waves rock Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Indian shores and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This natural disaster has once again exposed the human insufficiency and how poor a grasp one has over suffering and death. It may have taught us a lesson that we have a transitory existence in this world and therefore death is not our final end, rather a beginning of another phase of life. On the other hand, it raises a fundamental question regarding the existence of God. If God exists, why does He allow such tragedy, pain and suffering? Is He punishing us because of our sins? Can we believe in a God who punishes us for our sins? If we believe that we suffer and experience death because of our sins, the very meaning of suffering seems to vanish. If we consider sin to be the sign of our human weakness, what is the place of sin in our lives?

4.1 Sin

Human beings are imperfect. They are very often guided by needs, instinct, emotions, and passions. Though human beings are called rational animals, they do not behave exactly like animals. They are guided by reason and this is what distinguishes human beings from animals. Our life has a dual nature, having an animal life and a moral life and this duality makes us aware of our personality as human beings. Whatever hinders this life of human beings from establishing perfect relationship with their moral world is evil. It is a death far greater than natural death.¹⁰³

Sin is nothing but selfishness. It is the failure of human beings to be true to their real self. It is a kind of revolt against the spirit of human beings, the divine in them. It is the negation of everything. The notion of sin is clearly portrayed by Tagore:

It is our desires that limit the scope of our self-realisation, hinder our extension of consciousness, and give rise to sin, which is the innermost barrier that keeps us apart from our God, setting up disunion and arrogance of exclusiveness. For sin is not one mere action, but it is an attitude of life

¹⁰³ Tagore, *Personality*, 81.

which takes for granted that our goal is finite, that our self is the ultimate truth and that we are not all essentially one but exist each for his own separate individual existence.¹⁰⁴

Evil is the denial of the dependence of the self. It is the antagonism of the individual to the whole world which is the ground and truth of the individual self.¹⁰⁵ It is a kind of setting one's superficial self against one's true self. It is a division of self against self which is one's shadow against the self which is one's reality. Therefore, Tagore expresses this in lyric eighteen found in *Stray Birds* that we do not see our real selves, what we see is our shadow.¹⁰⁶ When we set selfish standards for us, we start distinguishing mine and yours and thus we become slaves to the fancied goods of wealth and property not objects of real worth but phantoms raised by the selfish imagination. Selfishness is the root of evil. Tagore has rightly said that our selfish desires are our fetters, and our possessions our limitations.¹⁰⁷ Selfishness is compared to the mist which blocks our vision and makes us forget our true being. Tagore says, "THE mist is like the earth's desire. / It hides the sun for whom she cries."¹⁰⁸ In the clutches of selfishness, we think that finite objects can satisfy the infinite craving within us. If we are bound by the desires, we seek false end. What we possess does not satisfy our needs. Our heart is still burdened by the thirst for God, the hunger for the infinite and the transcendent. This is the sign that we are finite and impotent beings. We seek good but in our ignorance we mistake wrong for the good. It is in our ignorance and selfishness that we believe the path to blessedness rests in the possession of riches.

4.2 Suffering

The recent tsunami waves in the Indian Ocean have inflicted untold suffering on the human beings. Thousands of lives were lost, many of the survivors lost their belongings, relatives and desire to live in misery. This leads us to ask, "What place does suffering have in the world?" Tagore tells us that human beings suffer whenever their desires are not satisfied. But human beings do not care to know if their desire represent

¹⁰⁴ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 60.

¹⁰⁶ Tagore, *Stray Birds*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Tagore, *Stray Birds*, 24.

the need of their real beings or their selfish nature. They are really helped by God's refusal of many desires of their superficial self.¹⁰⁹ In Tagore's writings we also come across many passages where he states that God employs suffering and misfortune of the world as occasions to draw human beings' attention to their real destiny. He expresses this very clearly in lyric twenty-seven, in *Gitanjali*:

Misery knocks at thy door, and her
message is that thy lord is wakeful, and
he alls thee to the love-tryst through
the darkness of night.¹¹⁰

In lyric thirty-nine of *Gitanjali*, Tagore says that God comes to the aid of his people when they are overcome by the desires and passions that lead them astray. Tagore prays for help when his desire blinds his mind with delusion and dust.¹¹¹

God sends pain and suffering out of love for human beings. God can heal our wounds because he is the one who hurts us as expressed in *Gitanjali*, "God says to man, 'I heal you therefore / I hurt, love you therefore punish.'" ¹¹² To the interviewer of *Evening Wisconsin*, an American paper, Rabindranath said, "Only by suffering and sorrow shall you be free from your crushing load. I do not know in what form it will come to you, but it is the only way. Only by great suffering and terrible humiliation shall you be made whole."¹¹³

Thus, pains and sufferings are nothing but opportunities offered by God to us so that we can rise above human weaknesses. Suffering is not just punishment but also the sign of our disobedience of God's law. The entire universe is set in order by the divine reason. Oscar Wilde has rightly said, "Destiny is no blind power, but providence. God is, no doubt, a loving God of mercy, but He is also a God of justice. His love expresses itself by means of laws. As He does not break His laws for the sake of His suppliant, He seems hard and pitiless."¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹² Tagore, *Stray Birds*, 17.

¹¹³ Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 59.

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 59-60.

4.3 Death

The state of supreme bliss does not mean death but completeness. It is the perfection of consciousness, where one's vision is free from dust and darkness. It is a perfect clearness and transparency through which God's rays pass and repass without any hindrance. It is complete harmony, perfect love, and the highest joy. Like the Indian philosophers, Tagore believes in the gradual perfection of individuals until the ideal is attained. The soul passes through many lives before the goal is achieved. In the process of reaching towards perfection, due to the weakness of our flesh, we have to renew our body, and this renewal is what we call death. Thus, death is not the end of everything but a preparation for a higher and fuller life.

Tagore again says that the flower must bring forth the fruit. But when the time of its fruition arrives, it sheds its exquisite petals and cruel economy compels it to give up its sweet perfume.¹¹⁵ In order for the flower to blossom, the bud has to die; for the fruit, the flower; for the seed, the fruit; for the plant, the seed. Thus, life is a process of eternal birth and death. Birth is death, and death is birth. All progress is sacrifice.¹¹⁶ Therefore, according to Tagore, only when we are detached from the one individual fact of death we see its blankness and become dismayed. We are not able to see the wholeness of life of which death is part. The perfect sacrifice of the Cross by itself meant death and persecution, but it had a spiritual fact which shone out in the darkness and overpowered it, the victory of spirit over death. The physical event enables oneself to give up the body as a last offering to God. It is the final homage on earth to be paid to the whole. In death the very being of the finite self is cancelled.¹¹⁷ Thus, if we look at death as the end of everything, it loses its meaning.

4.4 Rebirth

With regard to the future life, Tagore's view is similar to that of the Upanishads, which also hold the two views of immortality and rebirth, the life that is complete and perfect and the life which continues endlessly. As long as human beings are finite and hold on to their selfish nature, their destiny is unfulfilled, and the final consummation of becoming one with God is not attained, they are in the moral life struggling hard to attain the end which they do not get. Human beings perpetually strive to achieve that goal but

¹¹⁵ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 99.

¹¹⁶ Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 55.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

never reach it. For a finite being to achieve this impossible task infinite time is not enough. So long as human beings identify themselves with their finite, fleeting personality, they are subject to the law of infinite progress and perpetual approximation. They are bound in the cycle of births and deaths. They go from life to life; death becomes just an incident in life a change from one scene to another. But when one surrenders oneself to the universal life, and the self becomes one with the Supreme, then one gains the bliss of heaven and shares eternal life. Then human beings are lifted above the travail of births and deaths and above mere succession in time to which alone death is relevant. In the moral life, where human beings try to reach the goal, they have the unending succession in time which belongs to the finite; but when moral life is swallowed up in religion, then the spirit transcends time and attains timeless immortality.

4.5 Liberation

The true mission or destiny of the religious soul is not seeking isolation or renunciation. It is to be a part of society recognising the infinite and boundless possibilities of human being and offering oneself up entirely and exhaustlessly to the service of one's fellow human beings. The end of human being is the realisation of the self or the infinite in oneself. This is one's *dharma*. According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, "*Dharma* literally means nature, reality, or essence."¹¹⁸ Our essence is to become infinite. Our *dharma* is to become the infinite which already has its seeds in us. The character which distinguishes human beings from other species of creation is the presence of the conscious endeavour to free themselves from the limit of self and nature and seek for a seat in the kingdom of God. Tagore recognises this endeavour when he says, "In man, the life of the animal has taken a further bend. He has come to the beginning of a world which has to be created by his own will and power."¹¹⁹ Human beings are persons. Their activities should be characterised by the freedom of endless growth. If they fail to do their share of work in the world of creative freedom, they sin against the eternal in them. Their salvation lies in freeing their personality from the narrow limitation of selfhood. It is the realisation of the infinite attained by surrendering the finite. This giving up of the finite interests dear to them brings pain and suffering, hazard and hardship. One has to fight a spiritual war with the finite. Every moment one's finiteness is transcended. It is in the nature of the finite to pass away before the higher or the infinite arises.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹¹⁹ Tagore, *Personality*, 88.

In order to overcome sin, one has to repudiate one's exclusiveness and rest one's faith firm in the all-inclusive whole. The consciousness of human being gets fulfilment when it is merged in the consciousness of God. Religion speaks to us of that love in which all our earthly relations are swallowed up. Only in the relation of the soul to God do we have a fruition of our desires the final condition is a state where utter delight of perfect harmony and all discords are overcome, an eternal calm where the unrest of life is stilled in such a state we have a transvaluation of all values.¹²⁰

The crucial point of distinction between Western Christianity and Vedantism is to be found in the relation of God to the human being. Christianity lays emphasis on human being's sinfulness, guilt, and need of salvation by the grace of God. If human beings, who are naturally corrupt, become transformed into virtuous soul it can only be influx of divine energy. Tagore does not accept the doctrine of human being's natural corruption. Tagore clearly says in *Sadhana*:

It has been held that sinfulness is the nature of man, and only by the special grace of God can a particular person be saved. This is like saying that the nature of the seed is to remain enfolded within its shell, and it is only by some special miracle that it can be grown into a tree.¹²¹

Tagore overthrows the barrier between God and human being, just as in Vedanta. The infinite has its dwelling place in human being and that is the glory of human beings. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore says, "And my / pride is from the life-throb of ages / dancing in my blood this moment."¹²² The infinite is in human beings but it is not perfectly realised, but it is potential in them. Human being is but the localised expression of God.¹²³ The light that lightens every man that comes into the world is there though it does not shine through. Progress is the unfolding with an ever-increasing and brightening radiance of the perfect light within.

We need to remove *avidya* or ignorance, breaking of the bonds of *maya* or selfishness, and not an ingress of divine spirit from outside as the result of prayer to an offended God who yet loves human beings and has pity for their frailty. Sin is the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹²¹ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 74.

¹²² Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 69.

¹²³ Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 70.

inordinate love of darkness, thinking to be the real self. The dark and dusty soul thinks itself to be enjoying what it refuses to God, to whom it actually belongs. It enjoys in its own darkness, and this enjoyment is its death and destruction. The sinful soul believes that the wheels of time move forward for ministering to its needs and comfort. Deliverance does not depend on grace but on the removal of ignorance and selfishness. Tagore, in *Sadhana*, describes that the Indian way of thinking is that the true deliverance of human beings is the deliverance from *avidya*, from ignorance. Hence, one needs to destroy which is negative and which blocks one's vision of truth, not which is positive and real because that is not possible.

The barrier between God and human being, according to the Vedantic ideas, is not impassable.¹²⁴ Human beings can become as perfect as the father in heaven. Radhakrishnan resorts to Taittiriya Upanishad and says that the Upanishad proclaims that the knower of the Brahman attains liberation. However, in the West the idea of reconciling our unity with the infinite being is condemned as blasphemy. Tagore is quite firm on this point. He says, "Yes, we must become Brahma. We must not shrink from avowing this. Our existence is meaningless if we never can expect to realise the highest perfection that there is."¹²⁵ The Hindus would not accept that what has been possible with Christ is impossible with other people. All people would attain the perfection that Christ attained if they wished. God has spoken to Christ in the same way just as He had spoken to other great people of all ages and countries. Radhakrishnan sums up this beautifully, "When the highest perfection is reached, the rhythm of man's life becomes one with that of the cosmic spirit; his soul then vibrates in perfect accord with the eternal principle."¹²⁶

The liberated soul does not try to escape from this world, rather makes an attempt to improve it. All its work is rooted in an inner peace and repose. It is the same kind of activity as that which characterises the divine.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁵ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 155.

¹²⁶ Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 72.

CHAPTER V

RELEVANCE OF TAGORE

Tagore is not merely a historical personality to be forgotten, he is a living legend of Bengal and India. This legacy remains a meeting point of diverse cultural backgrounds, different religious faiths and a variety of life styles.

5.1 The Historical Significance of Tagore

Tagore was born at the time of great epoch in Bengal, when the currents of three movements started giving a new direction to the culture of the country. One of these was the religious movement introduced by Raja Rammohan Roy. It was revolutionary, for he tried to reopen the channel of spiritual life which had been obstructed for many years by the sands and debris of creeds that were formal and materialistic, fixed in external practices lacking spiritual significance.¹²⁷ This was an attempt to reconcile the teaching of ancient religions with the discoveries of modern science.

The second was literary being led by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, who, with a touch of his magic wand, aroused Bengali literature from her agelong slumber. Before he entered the scene, their literature had been oppressed by a rigid rhetoric that choked its life and loaded it with ornaments that became its fetters. The third was a sort of national movement. However, it was not fully political, but it gave voice to the mind of the people who were trying to assert their own personality.¹²⁸ It was a voice of impatience at the humiliation constantly heaped upon by people who were not oriental, and who had the habit of sharply dividing the human world into the good and the bad according to the hemispheres to which they belonged.

Among these, the religious movement had a great influence on Tagore. It aimed at a social and religious revolution of a new kind. Its vehicle was the Brahmo Samaj of which Tagore's father was an important member.¹²⁹ It was a society of Hindu Protestants who combined in themselves the scientific outlook with a deep reverence for the purer

¹²⁷ Tagore, *The Religion of an Artist*, 7.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹²⁹ Sinha, 1.

tradition of their own culture. Tagore's early initiation into its ways was, to a great extent, responsible for his Catholic attitude and modern ideas.

Tagore lived at a time when India was in the midst of a struggle for independence. Nationalism was a powerful force in India and other Asian countries as well as in other parts of the world.¹³⁰ He was opposed to nationalism because he thought nationalism associated with the pursuit of power. Nationalism, as he sees, is different from simple love of one's country. Simple love one's own country is patriotism and patriotism, for him, is not the same thing as nationalism.

Tagore's nationalism means that we begin with our immediate neighbours, but we do not stop at any point and by the power of love we go on expanding the circle of our neighbours and there is no stopping on the way.¹³¹ Though, not an active politician like Gandhi and Lokmanya Tilak and his younger contemporaries Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhashchandra Bose, Tagore protested the partition of Bengal in 1905 and was in favour of Indian self-government. He also protested against the massacre at Jallianwalla Bag on 13 April 1919, by resigning his knighthood that the British had previously conferred upon him.¹³²

5.2 Tagorean Ethics

Tagore sees the world or nature is an inseparable aspect of God. The creative love of God is the source of the universe, which is destined to express the fullness of divine perfection. This world is the living image of God. Tagore adds, "The entire world is given to us, and all our powers have their final meaning in the faith that by their help we are to take position of our patrimony."¹³³ One wonders why there is evil in the world if this universe is destined to reflect the fullness of divine perfection! Is evil a necessary aspect of creation? Tagore believes that the reality of evils cannot be doubted in so far as they are experienced by us. It is a part and parcel of conscious beings to feel and experience contradictions, pain and conflicts. This implies that, in Tagorean philosophy, the problem of evils is not related to the *existence* of evil so much as to *the way* in which the experience of evil arises.

¹³⁰ Colussi, 119.

¹³¹ Ibid., 120.

¹³² Ibid., 25-26.

¹³³ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 137.

Tagore's credence to the experience of evil must not create the impression that according to him, evil is a necessary aspect of existence. Clarifying this point 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."¹³⁴

One must remember that Tagore has an optimistic picture of life, he believes in the ultimate goodness of the world process. He is fully convinced that what appears as evil will ultimately be transformed into good. Therefore he says, "Evil cannot altogether arrest the course of life on the highway and rob it of its possessions. For the evil has to pass on, it has to grow into good; it cannot stand and give battle to the All."¹³⁵ That is why, Tagore asserts that although evils are facts, they are not ultimate facts of existence.

If we look at death from the point of view of evil, it is generally considered as the greatest evil. However, this seems to be an evil only because it is viewed in isolation from life. If we take death as one single phenomenon affecting one individual it will definitely mean "the loss" of that individual. Similarly, if we regard death only in relation to the life that is being lived will mean end of *this* life. But there is much more comprehensive view—a whole-view is possible. If we view death in the universal context, it will appear to be a very necessary and useful aspect of the benign creation. Tagore clarifies this by saying that only when we detach one individual fact or death we see its blankness and become dismayed. We lose sight of the wholeness of a life of which death is part.¹³⁶

Tagore says that the theists find the problem of evil a puzzling one because of their inability to take a balanced view of the presence of evil in the universe. They go either to one extreme, and are not prepared to accept that the creation of an omnipotent God can be imperfect, or they go to the other extreme and feel that once the reality of evil is accepted, it becomes a necessary factor of existence. Tagore adds that both of these views regarding evil present intellectual as well as existential problems that the theists are unable to solve.

Therefore, Tagore states firstly that evils are experienced in the world because they are aspects of the world—aspects of the created world. He sees no logical inconsistency in believing that creation has to be imperfect. The very fact that it has been

¹³⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 50.

created implies that it cannot have the perfection that the creator possesses; to be created means imperfection. All the same, one should not mean that imperfections are permanent aspects of existence. Evils are not ultimate facts; they have to be transcended. If we accept this, the problem of reconciling the presence of evil with the power and goodness of God will not arise.

Good is the positive element in human nature. The sense of goodness arises out of a truer view of our life, which is the connected view of the wholeness of life, and which concerns not only what is present before us, but also what is not and perhaps never humanly can be. He says when we begin to have an extended vision of our true selves, when we realise that we are much more than at present we seem to be, we begin to get conscious of our moral nature. Then we grow aware of that which we are yet to be, and the state not yet experienced by us becomes more real than that under our direct experience. Necessarily, our perspective of life changes, and our will takes the place of our wishes. For will is the supreme wish of the larger life, the life whose greater portion is out of our present reach, whose objects are not for the most part before our sight. Then comes the conflict of our lesser self with our greater self, of our wishes with our will, of the desire for things affecting our senses with the purpose that is within our heart. Then we begin to distinguish between what we immediately desire and what is good. For good is that which is desirable for our greatest self.¹³⁷

He seems to be aware of the fact that certain limitations and imperfections are inherent in human beings because of their embodied existence. They go along with finitude. Though this is an evil, it is not permanent. One can accept it as only a phase that paves the way for its transcendence. Evil, thus, is an occasion for the disciplining of life, for the “surplus” in man to assert and display itself.¹³⁸

Tagore views life as a perpetual struggle between good and evil. At this point Tagore tries to clear up a possible source of misunderstanding. The usual opposition between good and evil, that is experienced in life, may create the impression that evil and good are essentially antithetical to each other. A caution has to be exercised at this juncture.

The concepts of finiteness and imperfection, for example, are opposed to the concepts of infinity and perfection. But the human existence, which is apparently an

¹³⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹³⁸ Sinha, 93.

imperfect and finite existence, does not negate the possibility of perfection or infinity. In this sense evils are not opposed to the good. Tagore says, “In fact, imperfection is not a negation of perfectness; finitude is not contradictory to infinity: they are but completeness manifested in parts, infinity revealed within bounds.”¹³⁹

5.3 Discovering the Bible in *Gitanjali*

The Bible has been a channel of inspiration and enthusiasm for many creative minds down the centuries.¹⁴⁰ The stories and images present in the Book of Genesis, the emotional outflow of the Psalms and the simple and bare poetic prose of the New Testament portray a stylistics instigating a literary genius to imbibe and imitate.¹⁴¹

Whether Tagore was inspired directly or indirectly by the psalms and other compositions of the Bible in his shaping of the various lyrics of *Gitanjali* can be debated. Those who compare the Psalms and the books of Wisdom to the flavour of various lyrics in *Gitanjali* may find a close similarity. Both these books express the union between the divine and the human. The mystical expressions of various moments of union found in them are identical. There are times of arid and dry relationship and those of ecstatic union as found between the lover and the beloved.¹⁴² The description of human being as nothing in front of the Supreme, the King and the beggar, the longing search for the divine and the divine longing for human company are very much similar.¹⁴³ Can we, therefore, come to the conclusion that Tagore was inspired by the Psalms?

Without getting into the temptation of discussing the influence of the biblical ideas on Tagore, a healthy comparison can be made between the Bible and *Gitanjali* at different levels. There are ways of approaching found similar to many a theme. Moreover, there are certain images and similies, expressions and style that correspond to each other. For example, we find sky and birds, earth and nest, flowers and rivers, king and the beggar and so on. While exploring their relations, we need to maintain the uniqueness of each one.

The first lyric, where the poet compares himself to a flute played by the divine, this instrument and agent relationship, the littleness of human being in front of the

¹³⁹ Tagore, *Sadhana*, 48.

¹⁴⁰ Edacheriparambil, 83.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 84.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Supreme Being stands out.¹⁴⁴ Through ages past the divine continues to pour grace into the “frail vessel.” This concern of the divine for human being can be compared to Psalm 8, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, “Do not be silent, O God of my praise,”¹⁴⁶ in Psalm 109 is similar to many lyrics, especially lyric nineteen, where the poet anxiously searches the divine, “If thou speakest not I will fill my / heart with thy silence and endure it.”¹⁴⁷

There are certain images present in the New Testament, which appear very much similar to that found in *Gitanjali*. Christ condemns the showy type of worship of the Pharisees, the same is told in lyric eleven where it asks to leave the chanting and singing and telling beads. God’s arrival in the unexpected moment, the mandate of Christ to be watchful, The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids,¹⁴⁸ are alluded to in lyric fifty-one:

The king has come—but where are
lights, where are the wreaths? Where is
the throne to seat him?¹⁴⁹

Again the story of the Samaritan Woman¹⁵⁰ can be found in lyric fifty-four:

I heard not thy steps as thou camest.
Thine eyes were sad when they fell
on me; thy voice was tired as thou
spokest low— “Ah, I am a thirsty
traveller.” I started up from my
day-dreams and poured water from my
jar on thy joined palms.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴⁵ Ps. 8.4 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁴⁶ Ps. 109.1.

¹⁴⁷ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ Matt. 25.1-13.

¹⁴⁹ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ Jn. 4.7-42.

¹⁵¹ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 49.

The creation story given in the book of Genesis, when the world is in its first splendour, when God finds “everything is beautiful” and the fall of human being by which there occurred a break in the chain of light, is pictured beautifully in lyric seventy-eight.

Even the notion of and attitude towards death seem very much Christian. Death is a welcome guest, and the person is ever ready to submit before it his life. Death is envisaged as a fullness to this life on earth. Lyric eighty-seven says:

Oh, dip my emptied life into that
ocean, plunge it into the deepest fullness.
Let me for once feel that lost
sweet touch in the allness of the universe.¹⁵²

Thus, death is the gateway to enter into the chamber of the “bridegroom.” The poet was keeping watch for the coming of the lord and tells it is for him that he bore the joys and pangs of life. And with his death he hopes for the fulfilment of his life. Again, lyric ninety-one:

O THOU the last fulfilment of life, Death,
my death, come and whisper to me!
Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for
thee have I borne the joys
and pangs of life.¹⁵³

The poet expresses his readiness to accept death whole-heartedly. Still more, death is seen not as an end to life but the beginning of a new life. Lyric one hundred express this willingness, “And I am eager to die into the / deathlessness.”¹⁵⁴ The positive notion found in the idea of death and after life is very much Christian. Death is an entry to the next life, a second birth to be fully with the risen Lord. Jesus says, “I am the

¹⁵² Ibid., 80.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 91.

resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”¹⁵⁵

There are many such relationships that can be explored in *Gitanjali* and the Bible. The religious, divine and human spirit found in both are very much similar. Both are rich sources of spiritual inspiration.

5.4 Tagore’s Humanism

An account of Tagore’s religion would not be complete without making a mention of his humanistic beliefs. His humanistic attitude pervades all aspects of his thoughts, and yet, he does not allow it to descend to the status of narrow anthropomorphism.

There is a sense in which Tagore humanises not only nature and objects, but also God. In the book *The Religion of Man*, while describing the purpose of the book, he says, “The idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man, the Eternal, is the main subject of this book.”¹⁵⁶ This appears to represent the basic idea which Tagore tries to develop in so many ways. At times, human being is raised higher to the status of God, at other times, God is brought down to human being in so far as divinity is said to be discernible in the heart of human being. Tagore’s God is somehow God and human being at the same time and he asserts that if this faith is blamed for being anthropomorphic, then human being should also be blamed for being human.¹⁵⁷

In fact, the humanism of Tagore is just the application of the belief that feeling anything as human—in the human way is a source of joy. It is the human mind that reveals the meaning and significance of things. He says, “It is almost a truism to say that the world is what we perceive it to be. We imagine that our mind is a mirror, that it is more or less accurately reflecting what is happening outside us.”¹⁵⁸ The one effort of our personality is to transform everything with which we have any true concern into the human. For example, the description of the beauty of sunrise has its eternal interest in us because, in fact, it is not the sunrise that catches our interest, but the fact of sunrise in relation to our interest or aesthetic sense.

This is why we always find a human touch in the writings and poems of Tagore. If a river is described, a ferry at once appears, if a scene or a landscape is painted, a human

¹⁵⁵ Jn. 11.25-26.

¹⁵⁶ Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁵⁸ Tagore, *Personality*, 47.

form must remain there; when a flower is presented, it is presented as bringing a message for the human soul; when the beauty of the rainy night is being described, the rains have to fall on “the spire of the temple rising above the undefined mass of blackness grouped around the village huts;” and if the quietness of solitude is pictured, its peace has to be intensified with joy by the rising notes of a faint song. The outer world, according to Tagore, is nothing but “a cradle for the human spirit.” That is why in Tagore’s thought the notions of life, rhythm, beauty, harmony, order, love, delight, music, etc., have become important. All these are human concepts, they become meaningful when they are related to human values. In fact, most of the analogies that Tagore uses to describe nature are related to human’s disposition and urges and feelings. For example:

Oh listen to the secrets of the world.
I know that lily is pale for the moon’s love. The lotus
draws her veil aside before the morning
sun and the reason is simple if you
think.¹⁵⁹

Such similies and analogies are not rare, and they all are indicative of the intensely human disposition of the poet-philosopher.

Although Tagore’s religious vision of human being has some elements common with humanism, it cannot be called humanistic in the sense in which contemporary thinking understands it. Firstly, Tagore’s religion of human being is theistic. It believes in a personal God. God is intimately related to human beings, so much so that He longs for their company. This Infinite wants to be manifested in and through the finite. Such a relationship is unthinkable by modern precursors of humanism.

Secondly, humanism insists on social service as the ideal of religion. One is required to worship not God, but human being or some human attributes. Although social service is insisted upon in Tagore’s religion also, but it is not in the sense in which a humanist interprets it. Tagore insists on social service not in a materialistic sense. He wishes that human beings should seek God or the Infinite in social service. It is in this

¹⁵⁹ Tagore, *Lover’s Gift and Crossing*, 17.

sense that Tagore asks us to find God not in the temple or acts or meditation, but in places where the farmer is tilling the land.¹⁶⁰

To worship the human beings or some human attribute is also not recommended at any stage in Tagore's religion. Tagore, however, speaks of love as a way of realisation of the Infinite. But this is not due to the fact that it is demanded by his religion. For Tagore the Supreme Being or God has created the universe out of love and so it is imperative for human beings to love every object in nature because they speak of the love of God.

Thirdly, reverence for nature is nowhere to be found in humanism. But Tagore believes in human being's kinship with nature, and feels a sort of exhilaration in the contemplation of beauty and sublimity of nature as showing human being's fundamental unity with the rest of creation.

Lastly, Tagore's religion is based on the divinisation of human being and humanisation of God. Divinisation of human being is not the essence of humanism. It considers human being and human virtues to be the ideal for which human being should aspire. Supernatural terms like divine or divinisation are not to be found in the dictionary of humanism.

But the fact that Tagore has been the foremost thinker dwell on the importance of human being in his religion cannot be denied. His work, *The Religion of Man*, and *Personality*, testify to the fact that Tagore has given importance to human beings and human values in religion. He also says that the Infinite is ever expressing itself in and through human beings, that He longs to manifest Himself through human beings, are arguments which can be construed to take his religion to be humanistic. But his religion gives due importance to God and so his humanism can be said to be a form of religious humanism.

¹⁶⁰ Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 11.

CONCLUSION

Rabindranath Tagore is no ordinary person; he is a genuine manifestation of the Indian spirit in the nineteenth century. He epitomises peace and beauty in the world where the forces of racial rivalry and religious division are very strong. His vision of religion is universal in the sense that he identifies religion with love. For Tagore religion is the hunger for unity through joy and sorrow. This hunger for unity is the spiritual substance of his religion. This desire for unity is the desire to discover the rest of the world in oneself, just as a mother discovers herself in her child.

Tagore's religion is an aspect of human spirit. It does not come from God, it is rooted in human being, and, therefore, his religion is a poet's religion. Religion, for him, is a principle of unity that binds us together; it is our essential quality, inherent in us. Religion enables us to cultivate and express these qualities in us. Thus, to realise the principle of unity is spiritual and our effort to be true to it is our religion. Religion trains our attitude and behaviour towards the Infinite in its human form. Religion emerges from ultimate self-consciousness. It is to see the Infinite in the finite, to find God in all things. Religion does not consist in knowledge or philosophy, truth is the essence of realising one's personality, fulfilment. Religion enables us to experience the deeper unity of all that exists, it is God. All the same, religion is not the ultimate goal but it ushers us to our perfect liberation in the universal spirit across the furthest limits of humanity itself.

Tagore is a symbol of harmony. For him, human being, nature and God are integrated into one whole reality. This universe is a creative act of joy and God manifests Himself in this universe. Tagore insists ceaselessly on the kinship between human beings and nature. What he means by kinship is that human beings and nature are interdependent. Tagore gives special status to human beings. According to him, human beings are the most beautiful creation of God and they are the highest manifestation of God. They are the temples of the divine. This conception of Tagore is very similar to the biblical accounts of creation, however, we must remember that Tagore does not believe in the biblical account of creation. Since human beings are superior to other things, they can control nature.

Tagore introduces us to a human God, who has human qualities. His God comes to our lives in our daily experiences—God comes to us every moment of our life, He comes in the sunny April through the forest path, He is present in the gloom of July night,

He comes to us through our joys and sorrows. Tagore's God is not in the temple, but in the place where the tiller tills his field, He is present in the pathmaker breaks the stones. This is really the God of our day-to-day experience. It is the God of every person. This God lives among the poor and the lowliest. Tagore, here, calls us to find God in our own life and our life experiences. Tagore's experience of God is an invitation for us to experience the silent footsteps of God in our life. Tagore recommends us to discover the core of our being. It is challenge for me to examine to what extent am I committed to the option for poor, to what extent this has become personal for me, to what extent I opt for the poor.

Tagore believes in the reality of evils as far as they are experienced by us. However, evil is not the ultimate fact of existence. What appears to be evil may eventually turn out to be good. He believes in the ultimate goodness of the world process. He thinks that the good is the positive element in human being.

He conceives sin as our selfishness and failure to be true to our real selves. Our sin is a claim of independence on God. God employs suffering and misfortune of the world as an occasion to draw human beings' attention to their real destiny. Pain and suffering are occasions for us to rise above our human weakness and realise the infinite in us. Death, which is generally seen as the greatest evil, is nothing but the fullness of life, complete harmony and perfect love. Death of our beloved ones may cause a bitter experience for us if we are attached to the individual fact of life, but if we see the wholeness of life of which death is a part, our sorrow over death may turn into joy. Thus, natural disasters, like the recent tsunami, are occasions for us to realise the infinite in us. However, this explanation seems to be unrealistic.

The end of human beings is to realise their essence or the infinite in them, our essence is to become infinite. Ignorance or *avidya* is the cause of our bondage. As long as human beings identify themselves with their finite selves, they are subject to the law of infinite regress and perpetual approximation. In Indian terms, we are bound by the cycle of birth and death.

There is something very beautiful in Tagore: his heart, his tender love for God. He has expressed this love for God in some of his beautiful songs, for example, *This is my prayer to Thee, my Lord*. If we are to love, we need a pure heart, empty heart that can be filled with God's love. Tagore had tender love for human beings. He has expressed this love in his beautiful writings about God, about people, about nature; and he expressed this tender love untiringly.

Another aspect of Tagore that appeals to me very much is his humanisation of God and divinisation of human beings. He brings God down to human experience and raises human dignity. The God of *Gitanjali* is very much Christ-like, his God lives among the poor and the lowliest. Tagore sees the possibility for human beings to be united with God. In other words, we can become like God. However, Christianity does not accept this. According to Christian belief, we cannot attain the Christ-like perfection and even salvation becomes possible by the grace of the Almighty.

Tagore's religion, as I see, could be the solution to the religious conflicts of our times. His conception of religion is the essence of human beings. It is in us and therefore even an atheist can be a spiritual person. Religion is helpful insofar as it is conducive to realise our essence and bring out our human qualities. Therefore, it seems to imply that we can be spiritual persons even if there is no God.

Tagore maintains that reason and logic are insufficient to reach God, His God has to be experienced in our lives. I think that Tagore does not discard totally the role of reason, because he infers God behind all that exists in the universe. He sees God as the creative principle of unity in diversity.

If God happens to meet us, will He ask us which religion we belong to? The answer is "No." He will not ask us which religion we belong to. He will not even ask how many times we went to worship Him in the temple, church, mosque or gurudwara. But He will definitely ask, "Did you see my face in the poor, humble, lowly and weak?" He will ask, "Did you experience me in your daily life?"

Tagore gives us a pure religion, which is substantially the same in all ages and all climates, in which the purified spirit of human being can find its congenial home. His religion is not obstructed by any human-made formulas, or church ordinances which act as barriers. He sees fundamental unity in diversity, and, therefore, his religion appeals to all. He advocates the worship of one invisible God—it does not matter by what means.

Finally, the most beautiful thing about Tagore is his belief in unity in diversity. He was fortunate enough to be born in a country where cultural diversity is so rich and beautiful. Tagore explored this unity in diversity to the maximum. This type of religion cuts across the religious barrier, it is universal in human being. His religion challenges us to look upon human beings as ends in themselves and not as means. If we dwell upon his vision of religion, irrespective of our religious differences, we will be merged in a beautiful harmony that is our Indianness. As long as Tagore lives in our memory, he will continue to stir the conscience of the world.

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