

Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy in his Songs

Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar

Abstract

To talk of Bengali literature one must start with Rabindranath Tagore who has even crossed the periphery of our nation to glorify India in the realm of the world with his majestic artistic literary genius. Though he is acclaimed as a Bengali litterateur and critic and philosopher, he bagged the coveted Noble Prize for the translation and transcreations of his Bengali songs into English from the collection of poetry 'Gitanjali'. Westerners were initially enamoured of these songs for their peaceful, mystical qualities, which contrasted sharply with a world on the verge of a harsh, global war. These songs also accentuate the idea of unity, highlighting Tagore's lifelong goal to unite Eastern and Western traditions which was a heavy task at the time in British controlled India. Generally speaking, Bengali readers know Tagore for his huge body of work, while many Westerners still associate Tagore only with 'Gitanjali' or 'Song Offerings'. These songs are imbued with Tagore's insights and his view of life. Hence in my paper I will try to analyse the songs of Tagore to enlighten his ideas which will ultimately focus on his deep philosophy of life.

Keywords: Rabindranath, 'Gitanjali', 'Song Offerings', Songs, Philosophy, Mysticism, God

Rabindranath Tagore is considered as one of the greatest litterateurs of the world. He is distinguished because of his multifaceted personality and he is regarded as the most renowned Bengali poet, playwright, novelist, short story writer, philosopher, essayist, critic, composer, painter, and educator. Though he is renowned in each and every field of literature, it is often said that if the universe forgets his entire creations he will be remembered only for his songs. He was the first Asian writer who was awarded with a Nobel Prize. He achieved Nobel for the translated version of his cycle of song-poems, 'Gitanjali' in 1913. 'Gitanjali' is actually a collection of 157 Bengali poems. Bengali 'Gitanjali' was published on August 14, 1910. The English version of 'Gitanjali' is named as 'Song Offerings' and here we get 103 English poems which were actually translated and trans-created by Tagore himself from his original Bengali poems. This collection of English poems was first published in November 1912 by the London Indian Society. However, the poems in 'Song Offerings' were not taken from the Bengali 'Gitanjali' only. Tagore picked only fifty (50) songs from his 'Gitanjali' and the remaining songs were taken from his drama *Achalayatan* and from his eight other books of poetry. He took seventeen poems from 'Gitimalya', fifteen poems from 'Naivedya' and eleven poems from 'Kheya'. The English renderings of 'Gitanjali' as 'Song Offerings' became very

popular to the people of the West, and as a result his works began to be translated very widely. The word 'Gitanjali' is actually composed of two separate Bengali words, the first one is 'geet' which means song, and the second one is 'anjali' which means offering, and thus together makes – "An offering of songs". But we know that the word 'anjali', which is in English 'offering', has a strong devotional association and is linked with 'prayer', so the title may also be taken as "prayer offering of song". K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his book *Indian Writing in English*, aptly states-

The Gitanjali songs are mainly poems of bhakti in the great Indian tradition ... The current coin of India's devotional poetry is melted and minted anew by Rabindranath, but the pure gold shines as brightly as ever. Even though the inscription on the coin is in English the imagery, the conceits, the basic experience, the longing, the trial, the promise, the realization –all have the quaintly unique Indian flavour and taste. (11)

'Gitanjali' or 'Song Offerings' is one of the most lyrical texts ever written in the history of Indian English poetry. The entire collection of songs is packed with devotional fervour, metaphysical reckoning, overflow of sentiment and thus, diminishing the gap between theism and atheism, strong belief and agnosticism, faith and doubt, nihilism and existentialism, strengthening the emotional bonding between the Soul and the Supreme Soul, taking the flights of imagination. The songs are replete with Indian philosophy and carry over the essence of our glorious thoughts and traditions like bhakti tradition. The entire 'Gitanjali' is imbued with the element of Mysticism. Like other mystics he was a believer in the essential union of the man and the external universe. Almost all of his songs reflect the portrait of 'Supreme Power' that is the Omnipotent God. In 'Song Offerings' we get an ardent prayer of a devotee whose main aim is to apprehend the divinity. Through his writings Tagore actually presents his never-ending quest of pure mysticism and spirituality. In the *Preface* to the book "Tagore: The Mystic Poets" Swami Adiswarananda, Minister and Spiritual Leader of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, writes-

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture, and nationality. In his writings, the poet and mystic takes us on a spiritual quest and gives us a glimpse of the infinite in the midst of the finite, unity at the heart of all diversity, and the Divine in all beings and things of the universe. (Preface 3)

Tagore's thoughts and ideas were profoundly influenced by the *Vedas*, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and he illustrated heavily from and dwelt upon these borrowings. Tagore frequently used to take up characters, episodes or themes from various Sanskrit classics and epics and also referred to the perceptions of the Upanishads in his various lectures and essays. In the section 'Author's Preface' to his collection of essays *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* Tagore wrote, "The writer has been brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship..."(vii). In the same book he also wrote, "To me the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit, and therefore endowed with boundless vital growth; and I have used them, both in my own life and in my preaching, as being instinct with

individual meaning for me, as for others, and awaiting for their confirmation, my own special testimony, which must have its value because of its individuality.” (viii) We also get to know his close observation of the *Mahabharata* when on 23 December 1940 he delivered his last speech ‘The Supreme Message of Humanity Uttered in India’ during Paush celebration in Shantiniketan where he said, “According to Western literary code, epics are based on war. In *Mahabharata* also the greater part of the story is occupied with descriptions of war, but its finality is not on war. It does not portray vindictive hilarity on the part of the Pandavas... On the contrary we see the victorious Pandavas leave their conquered wealth ...and take the road to renunciation.” (*The English Writings of Tagore, Vol- IV*, 610). Tagore was chiefly stirred up by the Upanishdic principle that in the beginning ‘There was one Brahman, who wanted to be many and so created this world’ (Taittiriya Upanishads, 2-6). He also believed in the Upanishadic teaching that in order to attain the Almighty we need to accept all since God makes Himself manifested in and through the finite world. Tagore follows the Upanishadic doctrine according to which Brahman is considered as Satyam (Truth), Anandam (Beauty), and Jananam (Infinity). Regarding his own approach to get the God, Tagore said in his book *The Religion of Man*, “During the discussion of my own religious experience I have expressed my belief that the first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with Nature” (18). It shows that in his mystic vision Tagore tried to observe God through the all-pervasive Nature because he believed that God expresses Himself through Nature. He said in the same book, “God does not care to keep exposed the record of his power written in geological inscriptions, but he is proudly glad of the expression of beauty which he spreads on the green grass, in the flowers, in the play of the colours on the clouds, in the murmuring music of running water” (101). And Tagore expressed all of these ideas through his songs like-

THOU art the sky and thou art the nest as well.

O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and

sounds and odours.

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through

trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western

ocean of rest.

But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the

stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never,

never a word. ('Gitanjali', No. 67)

In the *Introduction* to the English 'Gitanjali' W. B. Yeats opines that 'Gitanjali' has its roots in the Indian Culture which has influenced Tagore a lot to write his sublime poems. Yeats writes that the poems of 'Gitanjali' are –

The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. (xiii-xiv)

Tagore never believed in any religious institution or religious practices. He was attracted to the religious philosophy of love and unbiased outlook of religion and he believed in the presence of divinity within man. This attitude of Tagore has given birth to many of his poems and songs. Tagore sought for union with the Almighty in this mundane human world in the form of human. He was greatly influenced by the Vaishnav tradition where the God is considered to be Lord Krishna and all human beings are his beloved. Their sole aim is the union with this supreme Lord considering Him as human, *Debotare priyo kori, priyere Debota!* The western people can hardly nourish such feelings and so Yeats wrote in his *Introduction* to the 'Gitanjali': "We had not known that we loved God, hardly it may be that we believed in Him." (xix)

So, if we go to analyse the songs of 'Gitanjali', we see that the language of those songs merely suggests the union of two earthly lovers, the theme which we find in various western poetry. The people of the west can identify their own image of love and lovers in the songs of Tagore. It is conspicuous in the words of Yeats which he said in the *Introduction* to the English 'Gitanjali', "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream" (xvi-xvii). But, the poems of 'Gitanjali' are actually replete with metaphysical attitude that don't talk about any earthly pair but actually talk about a union of the poet with the 'Supreme Power':

I hold her hands and press her to my breast.

I try to fill my arms with her loveliness, to plunder her sweet smile
with kisses, to drink her dark glances with my eyes.

Ah, but, where is it? Who can strain the blue from the sky?

I try to grasp the beauty; it eludes me, leaving only the body in my hands.

Baffled and weary I come back.

How can the body touch the flower which only the spirit may touch?

('The Gardener', no. 49)

This is the fundamental idea expressed in 'Gitanjali'. The types of love or bonding which are shown in 'Gitanjali' apparently look like a mother's affection for her children, love between mortal lovers, Nature's all merciful love for human being, God's love for His creations; but actually, the book is all in praise of God. Tagore believes that we are the original inhabitants of Heaven and live happily at the shelter of the God but we are separated from Him after taking our birth. So, we remain detached from Him till our death and according to Tagore, reintegration with the 'Supreme' after our death should be our ultimate aim. In his book *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* Tagore says -

Man's abiding happiness is not in getting anything but in giving himself up to what is greater than himself, to ideas which are larger than his individual life, the idea of his country, of humanity, of God. They make it easier for him to part with all that he has, not expecting his life. His existence is miserable and sordid till he finds some great idea which can truly claim his all, which can release him from all attachment to his belongings. Buddha and Jesus, and all our great prophets, represent such great ideas. They hold before us opportunities for surrendering our all. When they bring forth their divine alms-bowl we feel we cannot help giving, and we find that in giving is our truest joy and liberation, for it is uniting ourselves to that extent with the infinite. (Chapter VIII, "The Realisation of the Infinite", 152-153)

God has many names like King, Father and also Friend and Lover. So, we find that Tagore has always been in search of God in His various forms throughout his life. The poet has become impatient and has set out to find God everywhere, but he has not found Him anywhere yet. It is therefore not problematic for the readers to comprehend lyrics in praise of God as the Beloved, however, to the European readers it might appear as astounding.

Tagore was also greatly influenced by the Baul singers of Bengal. These Baul singers are just the wandering saints who don't believe in on any particular form of religion or formal religious institution. They are simply self-learned persons who believe in the love of mankind and self-sacrificing work. They want to achieve God not through worship but through love and service. It was told by Tagore himself in his *The Religion of Man*,

"...one day I got a chance to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal... What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism. At the same time it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in Man and not in the temple, or scriptures, in images and symbols." ("The Man of My Heart", Ch-VII)

Tagore was so deeply motivated by the lyrical beauty and tune of Baul songs that he created a number of songs which carry the fragrance of Baul songs. Such aroma we can find in the songs like-

My guest has come to my door in this autumn morning.

Sing, my heart, sing thy welcome!

Make thy song the song of the sunlit blue, of the dew-damp air, of the lavish gold of harvest fields, of the laughter of the loud water.

Or stand mute before him for awhile gazing at his face;

Then leave thy house and go out with him in silence. ('Crossing', No. 46)

'Gitanjali', as a philosophical text, is primarily a devotional work. But it contains several layers of meaning. The feeling of self-surrender, intense longing to meet the Divine is the prime focus of this book. It is a work which deals with the Indian thought and culture, tradition and philosophy, myth and mysticism, spirituality and religion. As the flowers are nicely arranged in a garland and they are offered to the God one by one so are the songs of 'Gitanjali'. It is but the bhakti which is tuned with the Vaishnava-tradition.

The very first song of the 'Song Offerings' is addressed to this supreme power. This reflects the inner harmony that the poet experienced. He feels that he has been blessed with the poetic inspiration from the God for creating songs and poems. The words of this song seem to be the outpouring of his heart that endeavours to articulate his intense pleasure which he has got out of his poetic creation -

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine.

Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill. ('Gitanjali'-No.-I)

Again, in the second song of 'Gitanjali' we find that Tagore shows his humble submission to the almighty. The poet appears to be very spiritual and he is the true devotee of his Lord, the God. He feels that he sings because of the instruction of his Lord and he is so much overjoyed by the Lord's directive that his heart becomes humbled with pride and tears come out. When he starts singing, he feels that as soon as he stares at the Lord's sweet face, all the ruggedness and austerity which he had in himself is melted into one sweet concord. He is so engrossed in his song that he addresses the God as his friend forgetting about the self.

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

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony---and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord. ('Gitanjali'- II)

The third song also echoes the same feeling of the poet. He gets so enamoured by the song of the Lord that he becomes speechless. He wants to join the Master in His song but still remains infirm as the Lord casts a spell on him and on the universe with the help of His music. The poet feels a sort of numbness within himself-

I know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.

The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.

My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled. Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master! ('Gitanjali'- III)

Tagore was thoroughly a humanitarian. In many songs of 'Gitanjali' we see his concern for the poor, needy fellow of his country. He encourages and motivates the people who are neglected and oppressed. Tagore believes that the God resides amidst the poor, the broken and the lost people who have lost faith in their life and the Lord is there with them with his benevolent heart to love and take care of them. Dr. Radhakrishnan points out this trait of Tagore in his book *East and West in Religion*, "Being a poet, Rabindranath uses the visible world as a means of shadowing forth the invisible. He touches the temporal with the light of the eternal. The material world becomes transparent as his spirit moves in it" (137-138). He prepares the multitudes to achieve eternal peace and satisfaction in life. The poet also thinks that to be united with the Lord one has to cross all the nuances and difficulties that exist in the mortal world. The poet has full faith in the fact that when one meets with the toughest times of his life, and when one feels alienated and desperately wants to have the merciful hand of the God, it is only in that time the Lord appears to help the destitute. The poet firmly believes that God can never leave us or forsake us in our difficulties since He is the Lord. And this is expressed particularly in song number XII of 'Gitanjali':

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.

It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.

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

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!' The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

On the verge of his life Tagore believes that he will surely be united with the Lord someday. But before that he establishes himself as a universal human being who wants the wellbeing of not only his country but also the whole universe. His undying searching for the perfect freedom of the entire human race is a vital element of humanity. This element adds a special attribution to Tagore's humanism. That is why Sarojini Naidu says, "Tagore's song is the lyre of Heaven, emitting out the note of Eternity; it is the voice of all mankind, like the murmuring breeze of spring dawn, Tagore's poetry soothes and embalms the heart of humanity" (40). Tagore aspires for a land where there will be no fear, no pain, where knowledge will be free from any bondage. He wants such a universe which will be free from all the corruptions and evil deeds of the people. The poet desires to see India and the entire world to be full of strength which can uproot the slavery and make one free from the bondages of life which will help to attain complete heavenly freedom in life. And that aspiration is reverberated in the song:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action—

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (Gitanjali- XXXV)

So, finally we can conclude that Tagore's songs are the congregation of his life-long learning and all of which he had observed since his childhood. He gathered all of his experiences and influences, and tried to vent out his accumulated thoughts and beliefs through his songs. And with the help of his songs he tried to establish his own philosophy and thoughts which go beyond all sorts of scepticism and nihilism and proclaim the existence of a Supreme Power. But, the poet believes that he is yet to reach the zenith of his mystical chase, rather, he remains throughout as someone who is still on his journey to reach the summit to get "the immortal touch of thy (His) hands" where his "little heart loses its limit in joy and gives birth to an utterance ineffable".

Works Cited

- Dasgupta, Sanjukta & Chinmoy Guha (Ed.). *Tagore: At Home in the World*. New Delhi: Sage Publishers India Pvt. Ltd., 2013. Print.
- Das, Sisir Kumar. (Ed.) *The English Writings of Tagore, Volumes I-IV*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. Print.
- Ghosh, Joyjit. "Translation as a Cultural Dialogue between the East and the West: Re-reading 'The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech' by Tagore". *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 11, No. 2, July-September, 2019. Web.
- Ghosh, Sisir Kumar. *Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990. Print.
- Iyenger, K.R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2012. Print.
- . *Rabindranath Tagore: A Critical Introduction*. Stosius Inc/Advent Books Division, 1985. Print.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012. Print.
- Prakash, Anand and Ujjwal Sharma (Ed.). *Tagore and the West- Essays in Appreciation*. Rohtak: Shanti Prakashan, 2012. Print.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *East and West in Religion*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933. Print.
- . *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1999. Print.
- Ray, Mohit K. (Ed.). *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore, Vol-1*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt. Ltd., 2004. Print.
- Sen Gupta, Kalyan. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. Aldershot: Routledge (Ashgate World Philosophies Series), 2005. Print.
- Sen Gupta, Dr. S.C. *The Great Sentinel*. Calcutta: Mukherji & Co., 2001. Print.
- Shastri, J.L.. *Upanishad Samgraha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (A Collection of Prose Translations made by the author from the original Bengali manuscript). New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914. Print
- . *Lover's Gift and Crossing*. London: Macmillan And Co., 1918. Print.
- . *My Reminiscences*. London: Macmillan And Co., 1992. Print.
- . *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915. Print.
- . *Tagore: The Mystic Poets*. Skylight Paths Publishing: Vermont, 2004. Print.
- . *The Crescent Moon*. London: Macmillan And Co., 1991. Print.
- . *The Gardener*. London: Macmillan And Co., 1970. Print.
- . *The Religion of Man*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1932. Print.
- Tare, Nilesh Arvind. *Rabindranath Tagore: Mystic and Lyricist*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2012. Print.

Thompson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*. London: Oxford University Press, 1926. Print.

Yeats, W.B. "Introduction". *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (A Collection of Prose Translations made by the author from the original Bengali manuscript). By Rabindranath Tagore. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914. Print.