

Tagore's Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

Tagore's religion based on the divinization of man and humanization of God. While explaining the meaning of humanization of God, he said 'Humanization of God does not merely mean that God is God of humanity but also it mean that it is the God in every human being. According to Tagore the essence of religion is humanity. It is this human aspect which forms the basis of religion. Tagore believed that humanity and divinity do not belong to two different orders. They are just like two sides of the same coin. The aim of religion is to awaken the element of divinity that lie latent in man. To Tagore, religion should be always a uniting force but not a dividing force. True religion is that which accepts the unity of all people instead of their differences in religious faiths. True religion is inner development of the individual that makes a man to rise above his society, country and sect. True religion is the realization of one's own nature. Tagore never believed in any religious institution and religious practices whether it was Hinduism or Islam or Christianity. Tagore believed that organized religions that act as a barrier to communal harmony.

Tagore's vision of God, unity and equality found spontaneous expression in several of his lectures addresses, poems as well as in his novels. In this article an attempt has been made to discuss the Tagore's Philosophy of religion and the relevance of his philosophy to the present society with reference to a few of his poems and novels.

Keywords: Religion, God, divinity, rites, rituals, orthodoxy, spirituality, man, humanity.

Introduction

Tagore was one of the greatest creative geniuses of the Indian mind. He was a great poet, prose writer, playwright, philosopher, novelist, essayist, musician, singer, painter and an artist. Because of his many sidedness of his genius, Sisir kumar Ghose described him as "complete man".¹

Niharanjan Ray while writing about Tagore's encyclopedic mind rightly described him as a reconciler of indigenous and foreign traditions and "the Leonardo-da-vinci of the Indian renaissance."²

Tagore wrote more than two thousand poems and 1400 songs in addition to which he wrote a number of short stories, plays and novels. The worldwide reputation of Tagore came to be established only after the publication of *Gitanjali* a selection of his poetry for which he was awarded Noble Prize in literature in 1913. His song offerings enhanced his reputation not only in India but also worldwide led people thought that he was essentially a writer of spirituality and mysticism even though he repeatedly pointed out that he was not an ascetic.

The Influences on Tagore:

Tagore was born at a time when India was in transition from the medieval to the modern age. He was brought up in an atmosphere charged with religious fervor. A critical outlook on the past and new aspirations for the future marked the new awakening. Reason and faith took the place of faith and belief. Superstition yielded to science. Immobility was replaced by progress, and a zeal for reform..... The traditional meaning of Sastras was subjected to critical examination and new conceptions of morality and religion remodeled the orthodox beliefs and habits.³

It was a time when there were three movements in Bengal were germinating .Of all the three movements the religious movement introduced by Raja Ram Mohan Roy was revolutionary in its own way. Tagore was greatly influenced by liberalism of Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy based on the synthesis of all religions of the world.

Tagore was also very much impressed by the Baul singers of Bengal in particular. They are the wandering saints in India who don't believe in any religious institution nor do they enter into any place of worship. They were liberal thinkers simply believe in the love of mankind and selfless work. For them realization of God is not through worship but through love and service. Tagore personally came in contact with Baul singers and interprets their humanistic philosophy in the article 'An Indian Folk Religion' in his book *Creative Unity*.

Next to Bauls, Vaisnavism., Sufism the hymns of Mirabai, Tulasidas, the lyrics of Chandidas, mystic songs of Kabir have influenced Tagore. Perhaps Tagore was the first Indian to

bring out the underlying philosophy of their songs and he was the first person to add literary and cultural value to all these primitive sources of Indian tradition. Tagore himself translated one hundred poems of Kabir into English. What attracted Tagore in Kabir was his religious philosophy of love and unbiased outlook of religion and his faith of divine in man. Kabir tells:

*O servant , where doest thou seek me?
LO! I am beside thee
I am neither in temple nor in mosque
I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies
Nor in Yoga and renunciation.⁴*

In the same tone Tagore also says in *Gitanjali*:

*“He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the
path-maker is breaking stones”⁵*

Rabindranath Tagore’s outlook on religion was also influenced by the Upanishads and the *Bhagavadgita*. Tagore himself wrote in preface to ‘Sadhana’ (Sadhana VII) that he has been brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads were used in daily worship.⁶ “ 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 special meaning for me”.⁷ Tagore’s biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee commented that Tagore’s entire life is only an evolution and development of his Upanishadic education.⁸ This influence is evident from the following Upanishadic expressions like ‘Isha’ ‘svetasvatara’ , his idea of universal man(Vishva-manava) his conceptualization of divine presence in everything (Ishavasyam Idam Sarvam Yatkincha Jagatyam Jagat)⁹ and his assertion of kinship with God and nature reveals the impact of Upanishads on his mind. Perhaps the motto behind his Visvabharathi University is based on the principal of Upanishad. “Yatra Visvam bhavati ekanidam-” (Where world is a single nest) Though Tagore was very much inspired by Upanishadic thinkers, humanistic teachings of Lord Buddha and the Bauls and mystic saints, his philosophy of religion is based on his own thought process.

Religion is not asceticism

Religion for Tagore is not renunciation, not an escape from the worldly duties and responsibilities. It is not asceticism taking refuge in the ordered serenity of heaven. According to Tagore true religion is a rhythm of life, joy, action and existence. As Naravane said in his *Introduction to Tagore* The rejection of asceticism doesn't mean an endorsement of hedonism.¹⁰ To look upon the world as joyful is not to become a slave for pleasure. Self realization consists in maintaining a fine balance between the two things desire and renunciation. Tagore's faith was acceptance of life with joy. According to Tagore man's highest glory lies in rising above the defeat and disillusionment but not in the abandonment of the world. In many of his poems and plays we can find his constant glorification of beauty of man's life on earth. In *Gardener* he says "I shall never be an ascetic.....I shall never leave my hearth and home and retire into the forest solitude."¹¹

Tagore's concept of God

Tagore's method of God's realization is also humanistic. The *Vedāntic* conception of the divinity in man—*Nara-Nārāyana*, is developed in Tagore's philosophy of Religion. According to Tagore, true religion means man's humanity: basically the service of mankind. Tagore says "It is the human aspect of this truth which all great personalities have made their own in their lives and have offered to their fellow beings in the name of various religions."¹² In the words of Tagore, Realization of God through worship doesn't mean "the process of gradual acquisition of him, but the daily process of surrendering ourselves, removing all obstacles to union and extending our consciousness of him in devotion and service in goodness and love."¹³

Tagore is emphatic in asserting that the Divine is also in certain respects human. God is revealed in best way in man, sometimes man himself becomes God the object of worship for Tagore. He says "I want to see my God in that temple, where there are no rites, rituals and rigid practices. Tagore says all rites rituals and practices are obstacles in realizing God's presence in man's heart. Clarifying the nature of his religious philosophy, Tagore says, my religion is "the religion of man in which the infinite is defined in humanity."¹⁴ The aim of religion in the words of Tagore is the realization of divinity which is immanent in man. The purpose of religion is not only awakening the element of divinity but also making it universal as possible.

Tagore's philosophy of God nature and man

In fact Tagore visualizes God through the beauties of nature as he believes that God expresses himself through nature. He doesn't regard nature as alien and inert but something living with which he feels affinity. He feels an intimate companionship with trees and clouds. Tagore says: The wonder of the gathering clouds hanging heavy with the unshed rain of the sudden sweep of storms arousing vehement gestures along the line of coconut trees, the fierce loneliness of the blazing summer noon, the silent sunrise behind the dewy veil of autumn morning, kept my mind with the intimacy of a pervasive companion ship.¹⁵ In his mystic vision Tagore deeply visualizes God through the beauties of nature. In the flowers, in the green grass, in the play of colors on the clouds, in the murmuring music of running water.¹⁶ According to Tagore man and nature are not antagonistic to each other. To think it is so it is like a dividing the bud and the blossom into two separate categories and putting their grace to the credit of two different and anti thetical principles.¹⁷

Essence of Religion

According to Tagore religion is the realization of man's true nature. Here Tagore talks about different ways of self realization i.e realization through love, through action and realization through beauty of nature lead to the realization of the infinite. To Tagore man gets God only in love as he believes that God is inherent in true love. Tagore says that love demands certain action towards the object of our love. Tagore says that Upanishads never forbade us to work because freedom of joy lies in the work. Just as the joy of a poet in his poem, of the brave man in the output of his courage, of the wise man in his discernment of truths, so the joy of the Brahma in the whole of the everyday work.¹⁸ Realization of beauty is regarded as a way to the realization of the infinite. Tagore recommends that man should lead a life of nature."Tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of the soil water and air."¹⁹ Tagore is a pantheist in spirit. He sees God everywhere. He calls nature the most sacred place for pilgrimage and finds the miracle of God in nature. He immensely feels that all the changes occur in nature are divine manifestations. In the words of Tagore one can find his concrete vision of God in the following expression. "To me religion is too concrete a thing, though I have no right to speak about it. If the vision of God has ever been granted to me I have received the vision through this world, through trees and birds and beasts the dust and the soilI feel his touch in the sky, in the air, in water: everywhere I feel it."²⁰ It was under this influences Tagore introduced his own religion of man. An important aspect

of Tagore's religion is it is aesthetic in character. His religious life and poetic life are mingled with each other. He himself calls his religion as poet's religion.

Religion is self transformation

Life is a process of self realization and self transformation. Tagore treats dynamism as the essence of religion. Religion has the capacity to adjust with the changes taking place around it. When religion which does not change in according to the demands of the changing situations that religion is bound to stagnate and perish. According to Tagore true religion tries to incorporate even new ideas without affecting its own basic nature. That's why Tagore is emphatic in asserting that true religion is different from religion of dogmas and rites. That is why Tagore agrees with Radhakrishna's point of view that "If religions are to continue to have their original appeal, they must adopt themselves to the needs of the times. For religion there is no such thing as standing still. Stagnation is bound to overtake a religion, unless it is alive to the changes taking place around it."²¹

Perhaps novel *The Wreck* is based on this ideal. In this novel, though Kshemankari is profoundly religious, she preaches her son to break punctilious orthodoxy and asks him to marry Hemanalini, A Brahma girl. Though she follows orthodoxy, she advises her to be in tune with modern time. She even opposes the ideal of asceticism and diverts the ascetic path of his son by saying "*I am only an ignorant woman and can't give up the ways to which I have been accustomed.*"²²

One more important aspect of Tagore's religion is that he is against institutional religions which he believed false and dogmatic. True religion must not be confused with its external expressions like rites and rituals. Tagore says in dogmatic religion all questions are definitely answered, all doubts are finally led to rest. He believes that when religion has to make way for religious organization it is like the river being dominated by sand beds. The current stagnates and its aspect become desert like.²³

Tagore's Philosophy of synthesis of religions

We can see that Tagore never followed any religious system blindly just because it is followed by most of the people in his surroundings. He himself says in *The Religion of Man* "It was through an idiosyncrasy of my temperament that I refused to accept any religious teaching

merely because people in my surroundings believed it to be true.My mind was bought up in an atmosphere by freedom ...Freedom from the domination of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some organized body of worshippers.”²⁴ According to Tagore, Religion is the realization of oneness-unity- that finds best expression in *Gora* in which he tries to express the evolution of his own mental development by showing the synthesis of all religions.

In the novel *Gora*, Haran a narrow minded Brahmo who rejects everything Indian and Gora a narrow minded Hindu who rejects everything alien and accept everything Indian. Tagore satirizes the extreme Brahmoism of people like Baroda Sundari and Haran and who serves the interests of the British by embracing of Christianity. He equally satires the extreme Hinduism of Gora who embraces orthodox Hinduism to serve his sense of nationalism. Sujit Mukherjee points out that Tagore steers clear of the extremism represented by the obscurantism of the Hindus and the sectarianism of the Brahmos, thereby dealing out an “even handed justice” to both these ill-conceived forces.²⁵

Tagore was very much inspired by the life and humanistic teachings of Lord Buddha is evident from his translation of *Dhammapada* and the Bauls and mystic saints, and their love for man. In many of his novels one can find such characters that are simple lover of mankind.

We can see Kshemankari Anandamoyi, Paresh Babu, Jag Mohan ,and Sreebilas are the secular characters in his novels they were not prisoners of the narrow domestic walls. Nor do they have any problem with anyone’s caste or religion. They were guides, philosophers with balanced view of mind.

Anadamoyi, the secular images of his country Pareshbabu, the liberal humanist where as Jag Mohan who is an uncompromising humanitarian in *Broken Ties*.

The novel, *Chaturanga*, which is named after four characters. Sachis, a young man with noble principles, uncle Jagmohan an uncompromising humanist, Sribilas, the narrator of the story, a caring friend of Sachis and an attractive widow Damini, whose spell on Sachis causes a spiritual conflict between his divine quest and natural instinct. Sachis’s God oriented philosophy is just opposite to Sribilas man’s oriented philosophy. Sachis’s quest for God realization leads him to renounce all human bonds and takes him to solitary contemplation. In his exploration of divine

truth he rejects world, action, and joy. He even rejects Damini who is desperate for his love. If Sachis's, God oriented philosophy rejects a woman who loves him where as Sribilas's man centered philosophy assures widow a new life. It can't be denied that, Sachis remains as an eternal traveler exploring different channels frequently changing his path in the quest of God. In his quest for god he neither attains divine heights nor enjoys domestic bliss. Sometimes surging towards the light, sometimes sinking into the darkness, he remains as an unsuccessful God's aspirant, creating problems for himself and others. Damini and Sribilas are neither atheists nor ascetics; they simply represent what is human in human beings. By portraying Sachis as an unsuccessful God aspirant and Sreebilas as a successful humanist Tagore seems to show that humanity is necessary factor in perfecting of Divine truth.²⁶

Here Jagmohan who is the protagonist of secularism reveals that service to man is service to God. In this respect '*Chaturanga*' runs somewhat parallel to '*Gitanjali*' in which he clearly pointed out: *Leave this singing and telling of beads. Whom doest you worship in this lonely dark corner of temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!*²⁷

Conclusion:

From the above discussion it can be concluded that Tagore's conception of religion is something different from the ordinary conception of religion. Tagore's concept of religion is not the religion of one particular group of people but the religion of whole mankind. Religion for him is the essence of human being: an expression of man's inner nature. Tagore was against religious fanaticism, asceticism and blind adherence to convention in which there is no conflict between science and religion.

He conceives man as God attract even the minds of an atheist. The "revelment of the infinite is..... not seen in its perfection in the starry heavens but in the soul of man .²⁸ According to Tagore religion is a method of joyful acceptance of life in touch with the glory of nature in all activities. In the words of Tagore, religion is not renunciation, not escapism nor is complete absorption with God or even dogmatism. In his astonishing version religion has reached somewhat a deeper meaning that is the religion of man. To him man is the highest of all categories of God's creation. Tagore's philosophy of religion reaches its climax when he is emphatic in asserting that divine is also in certain respect human and humanity is necessary factor in perfecting of the divine truth.

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