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From Material to the Divine : Studying Rabindranath Tagore's *Sadhana*

Abstract

Identification of the Modern Era is with scientific development and materialistic progression, the human consciousness finds becoming more insane so much so that there is a considerable loss of humanistic virtues. In present time, man's prime motive and enchantment becomes love for material pursuits and possessions. This material proclivity of the mankind is the sole reason for the emergence of misery, sorrow and anguish in human life. Rabindranath Tagore's *Sadhana* provides a metaphysical ground for human life and existence and illumines the life of man unveiling unreal to real. His teachings stimulate the human being towards spiritual unity and purity. The emergent concern of Tagore is the bond of spiritual unification, that is only experienced when one takes a spiritual birth i.e. brings about a change in his consciousness, attitude and outlook by breaking away the layers of body consciousness. The underlying principal that is vibrant in the whole text is inner modification set in motion by true knowledge of the *self* and the Supreme.

Keywords : Enlightenment, Self-Realization, Soul-Consciousness, Karma-Yoga.

Literature mirrors life. Starting from the medieval literature to the modern, literature is replete with such examples, which exhibit man's greed of money and power leading to wars, disharmony, conflict and even his own downfall. To quote a few like William Shakespeare in whose tragedies like *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the root cause of the whole doom and action is man's mad pursuit for money and materialistic pleasure at the cost of humanistic virtues. According to William Blake a child's life is full of purity and sincerity but a man's life becomes cruel and corrupt as he grows up owing to his indulgence in the evil forces of the world. However, Arthur Miller presents twentieth century man, who becomes a victim of the highly commercialized society. In this way one can say that under the camouflage of materialistic and scientific advancement there is a reduction and extinction of virtues of human real spirit that are divine in origin.

Tagore scrutinizes the domination and influential impact of growing materialism on human beings that leads the humanity at the verge of collapse. So, Tagore through the medium of his artistic creations outpours his views concerning the realization of the true self; which is otherwise set into oblivion by human due to physical sovereignty.

“Man’s prime strength is in religion, Man’s prime humanity is spiritual” (Dasgupta 92). These words highlight Tagore’s supremacy for spiritual relationship among human beings. *Sadhana*, which is an embodiment of Tagore’s philosophy of life, written by him during his six-months stay in USA, stems from his endeavour to acquaint the Western readers with the ancient spirit of India; so that the line of conflict and disharmony get extinguished by revealing the essential unity of human spirit, its nature, its affinity with the Infinite and how the finite and the Infinite establish a connection of peace and joy. So, Tagore’s sole aim is to dissolve the religious and national boundaries, in order to bring forth a homogenous ground. He declares that, there is no nation, no religion, no caste; as the point of convergence for all universe is spiritual equality. In the words of W.S. Urquhart (1916), who represents Tagore as :

Thus, in striving towards a full realization of the capacities of its nature, the soul takes two directions – outwards and inward. It may lay stress upon being or upon becoming, upon essence or upon manifestation. The chief contribution which Rabindranath makes to the development of Indian thought is his union of these two attitudes, his constant insistence that a consciousness of the spirituality of the universe must not be allowed to deprive the universe of meaning. (403)

Another observation comes from S. Radhakrishnan (1989), who states :

Rabindranath’s philosophy of life is viewed ... as nothing but the ancient wisdom of India restated to meet the needs of modern times. His writings are a commentary on the Upanishads by an individual of this generation on whom the present age has had its influence. The soul of ancient India is mirrored in them. (3)

How to uplift the human spirit? How to evolve consciousness to rise above material pursuits? Tagore offers solutions in his *Sadhana* focusing through metaphysical reality of the human being.

(1) Enlightenment through Jnāna Yoga

Jnāna yoga (path of knowledge) acts as a treasure trove and serves as a nucleus to human existence, which has the potential to illumine the life of man from mere physical to the divine. It untangles the conundrum of human turmoil and misery, which evolves from one's unawareness about the reality of the self. Every human being in this world makes life long efforts to attain eternal happiness as well as constant and everlasting peace. But the tumult and unrest pervading in one's life's unhinges his consciousness and compels him to think from where really the mental stability and peace generate? What is the core of human living? Why we are here to suffer and are pressed to survive in this malignant universe?

The answers to above stated questions are attained through *jnāna-mārga* (path of self realization), which is said to be the most difficult of the four courses of yoga practice, requires great strength of WILL and INTELLECT. Since, all human beings originate from the same source, but during the cycle of life, one's divine essence get diminished because of the dominating forces, which stem from physicality. Now the point to enlighten one's self through *jnāna* (knowledge) has come. By illuminating a person through knowledge of his true conscient being, he is directed towards spiritual enlightenment, which dissolves his misconception about the physical nature of the self. This corporeal world has become a storehouse of anguish, misery, intolerance and disintegration. Tagore exhorts the reason, why human being become so :

Sighs of discontent and weariness of failure, idle regrets for the past and anxieties for the future are troubling our shallow hearts because we have not found our souls, and the self-revealing spirit has not been manifest within us.
(*Sadhana* 29)

Without knowledge of true self a man lives a life of ignorance imbued in carnal desires and so unable to discriminate between the real and the unreal. Since, the distinction of reality and unreality depends on one's consciousness. Wisdom is not meant only for yogi's and guru's. Every person has the essence of divine, but in the material world one is so absorbed, that they are looking out to get happiness, comfort, peace and relaxation rather dwelling within. Beyond this individualistic society and the human world there is one who is Perfect, Peaceful and Pure, to which one consigns to oblivion. Tagore states the fact that man has diverted from his main channel of divine love and that's why he is unable to accomplish peace, as he is going apart from the source :

So when a man lives the life of Avidya he is confined within his own self. It is a spiritual sleep; his consciousness is not fully awake to the highest reality of

his own soul. When he attains Bodhi, i.e. the awakenment from the sleep of self to the perfection of consciousness, he becomes Buddha. (*Sadhana* 25)

There is a close affinity between *jnāna* (knowledge) and *karma* (action). *Jnāna* constructs a realistic framework of one's existence and thus imparts a stable ground to lead a meaningful and pure life. So the inevitable demand on a man's part is robust inner urge to attain insight on the true nature of real and unreal, spiritual and temporal, eternal and ephemeral, indestructible and perishable. The distance between poles apart attributes can be extinguished by the recognition of the true self. Tagore exhibits in this frame of reference :

For infinite is the distance that lies between truth and untruth, between death and deathlessness. Yet this measureless gulf is bridged in a moment when the self revealing one reveals himself in the soul. (*Sadhana* 30)

So the true knowledge functions as a bridge to accomplish one's destined goal i.e. to achieve equanimity of mind, while performing the earthly roles; as peace is the natural quality of the true self. In this manner *jnana yoga* (path of knowledge) and *karma yoga* (path of action) are directly proportional to each other i.e. one conduces the other. Wisdom acts as an inhibitor to the senses as they digress a person from the path of self-realization, while one's detach *karmas* (actions) function as a catalyst i.e. assists the true self to restore purity in thought and action. So *jnana* brings transformation in the consciousness of a true seeker. As Tagore rightly says in this reference : "Avidya is the ignorance that darkens our consciousness, and tends to limit it within the boundaries of our personal self" (*Sadhana* 25).

With the accomplishment of peace through *jnāna* a devotee's all miseries gets vanish, as only a man of steady knowledge can achieve equilibrium, while performing its part. Those, who are wise do not get incite by the behaviour of others. *Jnana* imparts contentment which induces ethical conduct. A man of wisdom not only elevates his own spirit, but also modifies the action of the masses by the vibrations of his spiritual purity. Freedom from evil and viciousness cannot be attained by means of false knowledge. So in order to liberate one from the shackles of *vikaras* (vices), which bring forth anxiety, anguish, sorrow, conflict, chaos and disagreement in the world, enlightenment through *jnana* fulfils the aim. Tagore exhibits in this context :

We are in misery because we are creatures of self-the self that is unyielding and narrow, that reflects no light, that is blind to the infinite. (*Sadhana* 29)

Our scriptures are replete with stories of men and women who undertook intense penance and spiritual practice and have a vision of God. One is fascinated with awe and wonder as to “Who is God exactly?” because different people have vision of different gods and goddesses. In various religious systems, there is a large diversity of procedures determined by their individual concepts and conventions. One has in him the secret tempting idea that if he pleases these deities or saints, his desires will be easily fulfilled. One also fears, he may come to harm if they get displeased with him. This kind of spiritual effort based on wishes and fears does not encompass the true knowledge, as real *jnāna* involves comprehension of the true self and the Supreme.

When one acquaints with his true nature and the Infinite source, only then a spiritual upliftment takes place. True awakening at the level of thought, feeling, attitude and action furnishes peace and purity of the self. So one can say that true knowledge is that which is for all i.e. universal and not confined by a particular religion. Tagore exposes his views as : “We see then that man’s individuality is not his highest truth; there is that in him which is universal” (*Sadhana* 43).

A meaningful life is powered by one’s endeavours to enhance, achieve and attain, may it be physical possessions, inner skills and talents, and external attainments. In the whole course of life a man completely confines himself to its actions, reactions, attachments, achievements and affinities, and not pay due concern to the reality of existence. ‘Who I am?’ ‘Why I am here?’ ‘To whom I belong to?’ ‘What is my role in this eternal drama of life?’ This inquisitiveness to know the secret of life, should be the prime interest of every human being. Furthermore, when one realizes his metaphysical origin, then he reshapes his attitude and action to the corporeal world. To fulfill the earthly needs, is the only one facet or dimension of human survival. The whole spectrum of existence involves realization of the self and the Supreme. Without apprehending the *jnana* of one’s eternal role in endless drama of life, the gamut of worldly existence is incomplete. Exploring Tagore view point :

It is our ignorance which makes us think that our self as self, is real, that it has its complete meaning in itself. When we take that wrong view of self then we try to live in such a manner as to make self the ultimate object of our life.
(*Sadhana* 49)

(2) Significance of Karma Yoga

Tagore puts emphasis on becoming a doer action (*karma-yogi*). *Karma* (action) is so obligatory to man's life, that without it human existence seems as meaningless. The word "karma" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Kri" means "to do". Human life is based on certain code of conduct consisting of moral, human and spiritual values. If any of these values are perverted or manipulated, the harmony that should exist in the relationship gets disturbed, and peace in the society is violated. Newton Third Law of Motion states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction and which is always true for matter. Matter always reacts opposite in direction and equal in magnitude of an action. Since, matter has no mind it cannot think and choose its course of action. It has no choice but to react in an opposite direction. Today, human beings give prompt reaction to the external actions, which makes one think that human beings have started living like matter or a non-living entity.

The real human nature is not to get affected by external stimulus, as one has the power to think and choose his attitude and responses. If one creates good thoughts of love and peace, then the same energy will return to him and if one creates negative thoughts of hatred, anger and jealousy, then negativity will return sooner or later. The five vices, that generate from physical identification i.e. lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego, paralyze one's mind and prevents from believing in natural qualities of true self which are purity, peace, love and happiness. So, one needs to empower his/her mind with spiritual power. Observe Tagore's conception in this regard :

All our egoistic impulses, our selfish desires, obscure our true vision of the soul. For they only indicate our own narrow self. When we are conscious of our soul, we perceive the inner being that transcends our ego and has its deeper affinity with the all. (*Sadhana* 21)

The first step to bring transformation in one's actions is the enlightenment of consciousness with the right knowledge of the true self and the Supreme. When a man realizes his true spiritual identity, the issues concerning physicality proves to be futile. After attaining the knowledge of true relationship with the Infinite, a bond of spiritual love and happiness develops. Tagore confers the state of *avidyā* (ignorance) as a "spiritual sleep" and exhorts the humanity to make intense spiritual endeavour, as time for effort making is narrowing down to its final conclusion. Furthermore, he adds that a man's actions should reflect his higher state of mind, which he has developed through knowledge of the true self. To quote Tagore's words in this context :

To know our soul apart from the self is the first step towards realization of the supreme deliverance ... This we can do by winning mastery over self, by rising above all pride and greed and fear, by knowing that worldly losses and physical death can take nothing away from truth and the greatness of our soul. (*Sadhana* 24)

Human beings are so engulfed in the physical pursuits and material gains that they do not even think about their true origin, nature, motive and meaning of existence. One's all concerns are fully devoted to physical self and so his actions are. From which arises *vikāras* (vices), owing to dominance of senses. So one has to trap his physical consciousness and explore soul consciousness through his actions. For all this is feasible by one's awakened sense about his spiritual identity, which is accomplished through true *jnana*. When *karma* and *jnāna* conjoined, then the real qualities of the soul emerge and this mutation in one's consciousness from physical to spiritual leads to a state of equilibrium, which further generates supreme purity and bliss. In the same vein Tagore propels :

The question will be asked, what is goodness; what does our moral nature mean? My answer is, that when a man begins to have an extended vision of his true self, when he realizes that he is much more than at present he seems to be, he begins to get conscious of his moral nature. (*Sadhana* 38)

One's actions are associated with negative or positive energy and vibrations towards every individual. Starting from the primary level of action, that is one's thoughts, which constitute feelings and then forms one's attitude; which finally emerges in the form of one's actions. So a person has to scrutinize his every thought, in order to justify the true realization of the self. Furthermore, one's thoughts and actions should be incommensuration with his true spiritual identity, whose nature is at the polar end as compared to the physical self.

The Law of Karma, of action and reaction is applied to the spiritual sphere and is absolute. For every action there will be an equal and opposite reaction. It means that whatever one gives to others, the equivalent will return to him. So if one performs his every action by keeping in mind the above notion, then it assists him not to deviate from the true nature of self. But the reality is something contrary to this fact. It is so because a person is so absorbed in the physical self and its attributes, that he does not pay any attention to the functioning of his thoughts, which play a crucial role in the formation of action.

With soul-consciousness, one naturally emerges the true qualities of the self in his actions. Every action thus performed by a person carries positive vibrations, which influences his surrounding atmosphere. Karmically there will be a return of those vibrations. Pure, peaceful, happy thoughts are the most valuable treasures of human life. Tagore in the same vein asserts : “For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment, it is truth; it is the joy that is at the root of all creation” (*Sadhana* 72).

It is assumed that, the cycle of life, karmic accounts and the physical self bind a person to perform his role in the eternal drama of life. Moreover, the human wants to liberate itself from *samsāric* (worldly life) identity, in order to attain freedom, *moksha* or *mukti* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). But, Tagore’s views are antagonistic to this statement. He maintains that the Infinite Power creates the humankind to explore the inherent qualities of the self. Since, as a seed has the potential and qualities that if it is sown in the soil it bring forth into leaves, flowers and fruits; so in the parallel manner one’s true self is also endowed with divine qualities, and for their expression the physical self fulfills the function of a medium.

According to Tagore, every person should perform his part, while remaining in a state of self-consciousness and execute every action in the remembrance of the Supreme, who is the Father of the spirit. So all human beings are his spiritual children, but in the veil of physical world a person loses the sight of his true spiritual identification. The physical self is ephemeral, transitory and perishable entity, so it does not provide one with eternal joy and happiness; which is otherwise a possession of one’s real self.

So Tagore is expressing his viewpoint, that not to become a *Karmā-sanyasi* (renunciation of action), but to become a *karma-yogi* (a devotee of path of action). Both of them lead to the attainment of divine virtues, but the position of a *karma-yogi* is assumed to be at a higher level than to *samnyasa yoga* (reñunciation of the world). Since, the worldly circumstances validate one’s position as a *karma-yogi*, whereas a man of renunciation of action, has no scope for verification of his true consciousness stage to be stabilized or not. Tagore says :

Whatever works thou doest, consecrate them to Brahma. That is to say, the soul is to dedicate itself to Brahma through all its activities. This dedication is the song of the soul, in this is its freedom. Joy reigns when all work becomes the path to the union with Brahma; when the soul ceases to return constantly to

its own desires; when in it our self offering grows more and more intense. Then there is completion, then there is freedom, then, in this world, comes the kingdom of God. (*Sadhana* 88)

The realization of the finite and the Infinite inculcates a feeling of unity with all. In other words, the spiritual oneness serves as the function of universal religion. So the comprehension of the self modifies one's thought pattern and subsequently his actions. For a yogi desires are his enemy, which confine and restrict his course of spiritual journey and its achievements.

(3) Cognizance through Soul Consciousness

Tagore expresses the idea for indispensable need to recognize the essential unity of the world. He adds that the Supreme power radiates one's mind with conscious energy, which is imperishable and eternal; and exists in unbroken continuity in this world drama. This means that death is only a moving phase in the journey of the eternal spirit. Furthermore, he points out the binding power of physical world, which one has to overcome, by knowing his true relationship with the Infinite. To quote Tagore, who says that the prime motive of human existence is comprehension of true reality of the *self* :

When a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him. When he meets the eternal spirit in all objects, then is he emancipated for then he discovers the fullest significance of the world into which he is born; then he finds himself in perfect truth; and his harmony with the all is established. (*Sadhana* 9)

Soul-consciousness allows one to be natural in the company of others. This easiness on one's part helps him to relax. A deep love and respect for other souls naturally develops as one recognizes the spiritual kinship with them. There is the realization that we are all part of one global family, sharing one world, one home. Meditation is being in the awareness of one's natural qualities. The object of meditation is not just relaxation rather it is to become a peaceful person, to fill oneself with peace. To become soul-conscious is to become aware of one's true nature and qualities. It is this light of consciousness, which one has to bring into his everyday life. Tagore explores the view that a man should devote his every *sankalpa* (thought) to the realization of peaceful and harmonious nature of self and which is the true objective of human existence i.e. to express the innate qualities of the real self, in order to establish a world filled with peace and happiness :

As we become conscious of the harmony in our soul, our apprehension of the blissfulness of the spirit of the world becomes universal, and the expression of beauty in our life moves in goodness and love towards the infinite. This is the ultimate object of our existence that, we must ever know that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty'. (*Sadhana* 96)

The process of complete change or **transformation** from physical to soul-consciousness requires very hard labour at one's conscious or inner level. Take the example of an engineer, who in order to repair a fault needs a detailed knowledge of everything that is going on. The better he understands the machinery, the better he is at identifying and repairing the fault. So more one understands about the real self, it is easier for him to eliminate the impurities of his actions.

(4) **Awakening through Self Realization**

All individuals have their biological parents, but what about the spirit or the self. Since, the spirit is non physical, in the similar manner its parent should be one, who is also non-physical, incorporeal or transcendental. So Tagore designates the Infinite as the father of the self or soul:

Tagore bemoans over man's unawareness towards true **spiritual identification** and to the Supreme Love. This ignorance to the Infinite introduces in him a sense of loss and dejection. It is a common notion to think of peace as being closely related to the beauty of nature – the play of waves on a beach, the blowing of wind through a forest, anything from the rush and hurry of the city. Alternatively, man associates peace with some physical form of relaxation. In yoga one realizes peace to be his very essence or nature. Contrary to this a man realizes that trying to extract peace from the world around him gives only a temporary experience of it. So ultimately one become aware of the fact that neither the body nor nature can give the peace that the soul is longing for, but it has to be tapped from within.

Tagore wants to inculcate in mankind a feeling of unconditional love and respect towards the Infinite. This divine love is experienced only when one become soul conscious. The most exhilarating remembrance is the remembrance of the Lord. It is normally observed that when there is a crisis, severe pain, fear, sorrow, misery and helplessness, only then one remembers God. It reveals the true and loving relationship between human beings and God. He is the Supreme Protector. One has a perennial relationship with Him. He is the supreme Spiritual Father of human beings. The biological father keeps on changing in every birth. But,

the Infinite, is man's eternal father. When one has this perspective, true love towards God is naturally originated in the self and remembrance of Him becomes very natural. When the mind starts remembering God, it experiences such bliss and joy that cannot be attained from any worldly source.

When one tunes his mind and connects it with God, the benevolent being, then he fills the self, not just with light, but with deep compassion and understanding. In that compassion and understanding there is a change in the self, attitude and vision towards others. One's consciousness is lifted and he becomes more positive, encompassing and reconciling with the other souls. The impact of the remembrance of God cannot be confined to oneself. It radiates to the surroundings and spreads the vibrations of purity. It energizes the human soul with enthusiasm, cheerfulness, happiness and joy. The *smriti* (remembrance) plays a vital role in the path of self-realization, and this remembrance is feasible only after true realization of the self and the Supreme. To quote Tagore in this context :

Man was troubled and he lived in a state of fear so long as he had not discovered the uniformity of law in nature; till then the world was alien to him. The law that he discovered is nothing but the perception of harmony that prevails between reason, which is the soul of man, and the workings of the world. This is the bond of union through which man is related to the world in which he lives, and he feels an exceeding joy when he finds this out, for then he realizes himself in his surroundings ... Therefore love is the highest bliss that man can attain to, for through it alone he truly knows that he is more than himself, and that he is at one with the all. (*Sadhana* 22)

Tagore emphasizes the necessity of universal religion for mankind which brings all humanity at one level and the Supreme at the other; which unites man to his creator and leads to the improvement of interpersonal relations and restores peace and harmony in the society. Tagore exhorts that the Infinite spirit is longing for his spiritual children, but the finite is so empowered by the physical self that he even does not want to know about his real identity. Tagore says :

The universal spirit is waiting to crown us with happiness, but our individual spirit would not accept it. It is our life of the self that causes conflicts and complications everywhere, upsets the normal balance of society and gives rise to miseries of all kinds (*Sadhana* 44)

Thus Tagore's teachings embark on spiritual awakening of the modern man, who is otherwise ignorant of his real spiritual identity due to assimilation in the corporeal attainments. He serves the role of a *sadguru* (true teacher), who urges for spiritual elevation, that in turn assists one to acquire virtuosity, purity, peace and happiness; while performing his part in the eternal drama of life. Summing up with Tagore's essence of life :

So we must know that the meaning of our self is not to be found in its separateness from God and others, but in the ceaseless realization of *Yoga* of union; not on the side of the canvas where it is blank, but on the side where the picture is being painted. (*Sadhana* 54)

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