

Tagore and Indian Culture*

FROM age to age India has produced great men and women, carrying on the old tradition and yet ever adapting it to changing times. Rabindranath Tagore, as Nehru has aptly remarked¹, came in line with that great succession. But he was at the same time a most progressive thinker although rooted in India's past, and in his own self built up a synthesis of the old and new. "I love India", said Tagore, "not because I cultivate the idolatry of geography, not because I have had the chance to be born in her soil, but because she has saved through tumultuous ages the living words that have issued from the illuminated consciousness of her great ones." The conflict of the past with the present, of the ancient institutions and beliefs of Hinduism with the rational and scientific urge of the modern era, was at no time more prominent than during the last half century, and of those who faced this crisis bravely and heroically Rabindranath Tagore stands out as the most illustrious and versatile personality towering above most of his compatriots who themselves were leaders of great eminence and undoubted genius.

Before I proceed to discuss Tagore's place in Indian culture, it seems necessary to outline in brief the cultural renaissance that was taking place in India, particularly in Bengal, at the time of his appearance. Edward Thompson, in his famous study of *Rabindranath Tagore* gives a vivid picture of the political and social state of the country at this time. The earliest Bengali literature, he points out, takes us into a different world from the Hindu one of today. The Brahmanic influence had been for centuries at a very low ebb, and Buddhism reigned. Though long since replaced by Hinduism, Buddhism clung tenaciously to the mind of the people and its influence was working although out of sight. About 1200 A.D. the political control of Bengal passed out of the hands of the people of the soil and seven hundred years of foreign rule began. Bengali thought and literature suffered not only because the new Musalman rulers were alien in race and religion but still more because of the lack of integration in the political and social aspects of the country's life. Till the British rule was established there was no unifying power. No great literature could arise as there was no throbbing of the pulse of national feeling, and hardly any progress was possible in any direction. Life was narrowed in other ways than political ;

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1. *The Discovery of India*, p. 687.

with the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism, a process which was completed about the time of the Musalman invasion of 1199, caste had hardened and women's lot become circumscribed and veiled. About 200 years after the Musalman conquest a few notable poets appeared such as Chandidas and Vidyapati. The Vaishnava tradition of religious poetry was revived a century later and Vaishnava poems came to be produced in every village of Bengal. Under the influence of the Musalman rulers the great Sanskrit epics, the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, had been translated into Bengali. There was also a rich crop of Bengali folk-poetry and Shākta songs as well as the God-intoxicated chants of the Bauls. And finally came Western influence in the activities of missionaries beginning with William Carey,—an influence which gradually led to a conflict between itself and the orthodox Hindu culture.

It was at this time that Rammohan Roy appeared on the scene and founded the Brahma Samaj which inaugurated an era of Hindu reform the influence of which was to become a potent factor in the life of Tagore, for it was the poet's own grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore who kept the Samaj alive after the death of Roy. Two streams of movement now began to flow: the religious and the literary. The extreme reformist tendencies led to the development of a school that ignored everything Indian and preached wholesale westernization both in literature and life. On the religious side the work was carried on by the poet's father, Debendranath Tagore, who revived the activities of the Brahma Samaj and stopped the tide of Christian conversions that was taking place on a large scale. Bengal, in the midst of these cultural and religious conflicts, was filled with a pulsing eagerness. In the words of Thompson, it was into this ferment that Rabindranath Tagore was born on the 6th of May, 1861².

The Tagore family was thus in the forefront of the reform movement within Hinduism that was started by the Brahma Samaj. The father of the future poet was the most energetic member of that circle of zealous reformists and revivalists. Debendranath Tagore was a theist of the most uncompromising sort and his beliefs often clashed with the polytheistic creed of popular Hinduism. He created opposition even in his own family by his vigorous denunciation of orthodox Hindu practices like idolatry. Rabindranath inherited all this zeal of the father. But it must be mentioned that this attitude did not amount to a denial of the great spiritual message of early Hinduism. The attack was only on what Debendranath felt did not properly belong to the true religion of his ancestors. This

2. This paragraph is mainly based on Thompson's discussion.

is clear from the latter part of the illustrious career of this great reformer, for in his later years Debendranath became such an enthusiastic upholder of the true spirit of orthodox Hinduism that he came to be universally known as the 'Maharshi' or the great *rishi*. The word *rishi* means the 'sage', it is the title accorded in tradition to the ancient promulgators of the religion of the Vedas and the Upanishads. It is necessary here to emphasize that Rabindranath not only benefitted from the zealous reformist tendencies of his noble father but also inherited in a large measure his father's spiritual conservatism and love of meditation. These facts would indicate the richness and the complexity of Tagore's background both in social and religious matters. It is solely in the context of such an environment that the full significance of Tagore's contributions in the literary and cultural fields can be properly estimated.

Tagore's achievements as poet and man of letters need not detain us long, for these are too well known to students of literature all over the world. His eminence in these spheres is indeed unrivalled in the East if not in the whole world. It is not easy to point out a writer of modern times whose works have created such world-wide interest as Tagore's. Every country bestowed honours on the 'poet laureate' of the East. He not only received the Nobel Prize for literature but was signally honoured by the most venerated of academic institutions in the British Commonwealth, the University of Oxford, when for the first time in its history it held a special convocation outside its precincts to bestow the highest Doctorate on the Poet.

It is however not with Tagore's literary achievements as poet, novelist, essayist and journalist that I am concerned here, but especially with the cultural and spiritual content of his varied writings. I have already pointed out how rich and complex was Tagore's social and literary background. He received no formal schooling, but yet had an education in English literature the like of which no school or even university could provide. He read English poetry, particularly the works of such writers as Shelly and Keats, with avidity. And it must be admitted that this reading left a deep impression on the mind of Tagore. Even as a mature poet in later years his technique and imagery bore the stamp of his early acquaintance with these English masters. At the same time, however, another and more vital stream fed the current of his growing genius. This was the perennial wisdom of his ancestors coming down from hoary antiquity through the Vedas and the Upanishads. The spirit of these ancient teachings pervaded the atmosphere of the home of the Tagores, and young Rabindranath was

nurtured in an environment steeped with such sublime spiritual culture. It is only with reference to this background of his early years that we can understand the abstract nature and profundity of the symbolism of Tagore's poetry and the depth of his mystical and idealistic philosophy which proved to be greatest obstacle for Western readers and critics of his works. This is specially characteristic of his poems like *Gītānjali*, *The Gardner* and *The Crescent Moon*, dramas like the *Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber*, and his voluminous collections of philosophical and religious essays such as *Sādhanā*, *Personality* and *The Religion of Man*.

"What was it that made communication between the Eastern poet and his (Western) readers so difficult?" asks Aronson in his book on *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*. The answer may be given in his own words. "A poet handles his material, the experiences which he communicates, in terms of symbols. Not all symbols, however, are of his own creation. He himself is part of a tradition, which is not only 'literary', but embraces the whole of his being. The language in which he clothes his experiences is rich with the symbols of a past which is foreign to most Westerners.... Rabindranath uses symbols which are intricate enough for his own countrymen to follow, symbols that came to him straight from the soil of his people, and others again that had laid hidden in the treasure-house of ancient Indian civilization."³ The most precious part, it may be added, of that heritage was in fact contained in those immortal treatises known as the Upanishads to which I have already alluded as being the most significant source of Tagore's inspiration. A critical analysis of his symbolic concept of the *Jibandebatā*, or the *life-deity* motive, which emerges in the period beginning with the lyrical compositions such as *The Golden Boat*, would doubtless show the extent to which Tagore's religious and philosophical background had influenced his poetry. The idea, the poet himself once explained, "has a double strand. There is the Vaishnava dualism—always keeping the separateness of the self—and there is the Upanishadic monism. God is wooing each individual; and God is also the ground-reality of all..." (Thompson, p. 105). It seems appropriate here to add that even the so-called 'Vaishnava dualism' has its roots in the Upanishads and that there is hardly any philosophical idea in the later Hindu systems which cannot be traced however faintly to the great store-house of Upanishadic wisdom.

Next to these Upanishads, it was the teachings of Lord Buddha that nourished the genius of Tagore's thought and culture. This comes out

3. *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*, pp. 99, ff.

clearly in the poet's own reply to his Western critics given in his Preface to the *Sādhanā*. "For Western scholars", he says, "the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archaeological interest; but to us they are of living importance... The meaning of the living words that come out of great hearts can never be exhausted by any one system of logical interpretation. They have to be endlessly explained by the commentaries of individual lives, and they gain an added mystery in each new revelation. 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 own preaching..." In his *Santiniketan* series Tagore has given several illuminating studies of the Buddha and his teachings. As Thompson remarks⁴, he was drawn by the Indian ascetic prince Gotama as by no other figure in the world's history. It was not Buddha's gentleness alone that attracted him; he was drawn by his "great strength—his supreme calm. Rabindranath is temperamentally intellectual and meditative... and this is why he is drawn by Gautama"⁵. In this connection reference could be made to the numerous poems written by Tagore either directly with Buddhist themes or implicitly with a Buddhist atmosphere. He always speaks of Lord Buddha with deep faith and sincere affection. His poems convey an earnest appeal for the revival of the spirit of Buddhism in his native land whence the Master's Teaching had disappeared long ago escaping from the crushing bigotry of Brahmanistic orthodoxy. With bitter sarcasm Tagore records in one of his great poems the tragedy of how heartless Brahmanism destroyed the lamp of Buddhism which for centuries had illuminated Indian civilization. The English version of this poem, sublime in its pathetic appeal, occurs in his *Fruit-gathering* and runs as follows:—

"Over the relic of Lord Buddha King Bimbisār built a shrine, a salutation in white marble.

There in the evening would come all the brides and daughters of the King's house to offer flowers and light lamps.

When the son became king in his time he washed his father's creed away with blood, and lit sacrificial fires with its sacred books.

The autumn day was dying.

4. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

5. *Ibid.*, quoting Mahalanobis.

The evening hour of worship was near. Shrimati, the Queen's maid, devoted to Lord Buddha, . . . silently raised her dark eyes to the Queen's face.

The Queen shuddered in fear and said, 'Do you not know, foolish girl, that death is the penalty for whoever brings worship to Buddha's shrine? Such is the King's will.' . . .

Shrimati walked from door to door. She raised her head and cried, "O women of the King's house, hasten!

The time for our Lord's worship is come!"

Some shut their doors in her face and some reviled her.

The last gleam of daylight faded from the bronze dome of the palace tower.

Deep shadows settled in street-corners: the bustle of the city was hushed: the gong at the temple of Shiva announced the time of the evening prayer.

In the dark of the autumn evening, deep as a limpid lake, stars throbbled with light, when the guards of the palace garden were startled to see through the trees a row of lamps burning at the shrine of the Buddha.

They ran with their swords unsheathed, crying,

"Who are you, foolish one, reckless of death?"

"I am Shrimati," replied a sweet voice, "the servant of Lord Buddha."

The next moment her heart's blood coloured the cold marble with its red.

And in the still hour of stars died the light of the last lamp of worship at the foot of the shrine."

I need not dwell any longer on the deep religious background of the poet's life. Those who read his poems will find that they are the outpourings of a heart that had been cleansed in the fire of the glowing ethical teachings not only of the Upanishads and Buddhism but also of Christianity and Zoroastrianism. In his *Gitanjali* (iv) the poet preaches the highest religion of love and purity:

"I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act."

In accordance with Upanishadic teachings Tagore believes that the highest Truth or Reality is in Man's own being. The Brahman is in Man. In his Hibbert Lectures published under the title *The Religion of Man* Tagore gives the whole content and essence of his metaphysical beliefs and students of the Upanishads will easily detect the source of its inspiration. In fact, the poet himself makes no secret of it. In the very first chapter he says: "The idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book. This thought of God has not grown in my mind through any process of philosophical reasoning. On the contrary, it has followed the current of my early days until it suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision. The experience . . . convinced me that on the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge."

The whole of these Hibbert Lectures is nothing but a living commentary on the philosophy of the Upanishads. The ground of all existence is the one and unitary Brahman, the Infinite, which is present in Nature as well as all living beings. The highest empirical expression of this Reality, Tagore believes, is in and through Man. The noblest aspiration, therefore, is to realize this Infinite in Man and those who attained that ideal, says Tagore, were the ancient *rishis*: "They who having attained the supreme soul in knowledge were filled with wisdom . . . having reached the supreme God from all sides had found abiding peace, had become united with all, had entered into the life of the universe." This ideal which India tried to realize led her best men to the isolation of a contemplative life, says Tagore, and the treasures that she gained for mankind by penetrating into the mysteries of reality cost her dear in the sphere of worldly success. "Yet, this was a sublime achievement,—it was a supreme manifestation of that human aspiration which knows no limit" (*Sādhana*, p. 14).

There are writers and critics in the West who have attempted to explain this idealistic religion of Tagore as being due in the main to Christian influence. The *Gitanjali*, in particular, which was substantially the cause for the award of the Nobel Prize to our poet, raised much discussion on the supposed influence of Christianity on his work. But such a view displays a sad lack of appreciation of the complex cultural background of the poet's life. The theistic element present in Tagore's thought and belief, which

is advanced as the strongest evidence in support of the view, may be better explained as being due to the sure theism of the Vaishnava and Baul religious songs. It is unnecessary to assume any other extraneous influence. Let me again quote the words of the most famous Western student of Tagore, Edward Thompson of Oxford, who was himself an ardent Christian : "In my opinion", says this writer, "the direct influence (of Christianity) was very slight, and his (Tagore's) attitude towards Christian doctrine was hardly friendly"⁶. The poet's intense feeling for God must in the last analysis be connected with the corresponding religious emotion pervading the theistic Upanishads.

It is from the central tenet of the Upanishadic teaching on God and Man, the ultimate unity of Brahman and Ātman, that the ethical and sociological doctrines that form the thought-background of Tagore's poems and essays in the main derive. Even Buddhism is interpreted according to this fundamental Upanishadic postulate. In the *Sādhanā* (p. 17) Tagore writes : "Buddha, who developed the practical side of the teaching of the Upanishads, preached the same message when he said, 'With everything whether it is above or below, remote or near, visible or invisible, thou shalt preserve a relation of unlimited love without any animosity... To live in such a consciousness, while standing or walking, sitting or lying down... is *Brahma-vihāra*, or, in other words, is living and moving and having your joy in the spirit of Brahma'". Again, in the same work (p. 106), he says, "Buddha preached the discipline of self-restraint and moral life ; it is a complete acceptance of law. But this bondage of law cannot be an end in itself ; by mastering it thoroughly we acquire the means of getting beyond it. It is going back to Brahma, to the infinite love, which is manifesting itself through the finite forms of law. Buddha names it *Brahma-vihāra*, the joy of living in Brahma. He who wants to reach this stage, according to the Buddha, "shall deceive none, entertain no hatred for anybody, and never wish to injure through anger. He shall have measureless love for all creatures, even as a mother has for her only child...". In several other places Tagore deals with this same topic, showing the extent of the influence of this noble Buddhist concept on his own thought and feeling. In his famous *Hibbert Lectures* (p. 70), he goes on to discuss the psychological and social implications of the attitude of *Brahma-vihāra*, or, 'living in Brahma'. "This proves" says the poet, "that Buddha's idea of the infinite was not the idea of a spirit of an unbounded cosmic activity, but the infinite whose meaning is in the positive ideal of goodness and love, which cannot be otherwise than human. By being

6. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

charitable, good and loving, you do not realize the infinite in the stars or rocks, but the infinite revealed in Man. Buddha's teaching speaks of Nirvāna as the highest end. To understand its real character we have to 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. It must mean the sublimation of self in a truth which is love itself, which unites in its bosom all those to whom we must offer our sympathy and service". Whatever the philosophical implications of this interpretation may be, no Buddhist or student of Buddhism will fail to appreciate the fact that Tagore's intense ethical feeling of love and compassion is quite in accord with the social ethic as preached by the Buddha. What is even more important to observe is that it was this doctrine of unbounded love for all beings as emphasized in Buddhism that became the corner-stone of Tagore's social and moral teachings.

This brings us to the highest contribution of Tagore's life and work to Indian culture, namely, his great emphasis on universal love as the highest form of response between man and man, and between nation and nation. The ideal for man is to become more and more one with the Infinite in love and wisdom. We must *become* Brahma, says Tagore. He criticizes the static Vedantic view that man as he is is already Brahma or Highest Perfection. "But can it then be said", he asks, "that there is no difference between Brahma and our individual soul? Of course the difference is obvious. Call it delusion or ignorance, or whatever name you may give it, it is there... Brahma is Brahma, he is the infinite ideal of perfection... we are ever to become true, ever to become Brahma. There is the eternal play of love in the relation between this being and the becoming ; and in the depth of this mystery is the source of all truth and beauty..." (*Sādhanā*, p. 155). This concept of universal love or universality which is thus the key-note of Tagore's philosophy makes it the most eloquent expression of Humanism that has been given by any modern writer or thinker. This is the reason why the more vociferous type of Indian nationalist disliked Tagore, referring to this attitude sneeringly as his 'internationalism'. But the great poet and thinker would not yield in his conviction. For, he writes : "Men have seen the absurdity of today's civilization, which is based upon nationalism,—that is to say, on economics and politics, and its consequent militarism. Men have been losing their freedom and their humanity in order to fit themselves for vast mechanical organizations. So the next civilization, it is hoped, will be based not merely upon economical and political competition and exploitation but upon world-wide social cooperation ; upon spiritual ideals of

reciprocity, and not upon economic ideals of efficiency." (*Personality*, pp. 182-3).

No one who contemplates the world as it is today will fail to see the prophetic aptness of this utterance. This greatest of modern Indian Humanitarians fought for the true freedom of the human mind. Whether in politics or in education or in social reconstruction he acted without the least taint of narrow prejudice. Shantiniketan, the school he founded, became the focal point of many cultures. He was at home with any lover of Truth whether he came from the East or the West. His general attitude to culture cannot be summed up better than in his own celebrated lines :

“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 everwidening thought
 and action—
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

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