

**Humanistic Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and its Importance in Modern Society
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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to explore the humanistic view of Rabindranath Tagore and its relevance in modern society. Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Indian literature and he was the one writer who first gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. Tagore was one of the creative geniuses of the Indian mind, who had played a vital role in the history of Indian Renaissance in the 19th and early 20th century. Rabindranath Tagore played a very significant role in promulgating humanism in the beginning of the 20th century. There are many factors that shaped his personality and the ideals of humanism. Tagore humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of inter-personal relationship. The philosophy of humanism as developed by Tagore, is universal, because it deals with the analysis of the universal nature and creative existence of man. Rabindranath Tagore Philosophy of humanism can be studied in the light of his basic concept like Surplus in Man, concept of freedom and religion of man. This paper will focus on how Tagore Humanism is relevant for present society.

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Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore played a very significant role to promote humanism in the beginning of the 20th century. There are many factors that shaped his personality and the ideals of humanism. Tagore humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of inter-personal relationship. The philosophy of humanism as developed by Tagore is universal, because it deals with the analysis of the universal nature and creative existence of man. Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy of humanism can be studied in the light of his basic concept like Surplus in Man, concept of freedom and religion of man. Rabindranath Tagore is distinguished for being a man with numerous dimensional personalities and is the most eminent Bengali renaissance poet, philosopher, essayist, critic, composer and educator who dreamt of a harmony of universal humanity among the people of different origin through freedom of mind and spiritual sovereignty. Rabindranath Tagore occupies a fore position in the galaxy of the prophets of Humanism. He became the first ever Asian writer to be awarded a Noble Prize in 1913 for translated version of his cycle of song poems entitled Gitanjali. Radhakrishnan aptly remarks that, "In interpreting the philosophy and message of Sir Rabindranath Tagore, we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion, and art, of which his work is the

outcome and expression." He is a multidimensional personality and the underlying theme of his creations is love for man. The outward life of Tagore was not very eventual concept the Noble Prize and the founding of the 'Santiniketan' but he was mainly a man of the world of songs and literature. His life itself was a philosophy, though he was not a philosopher in systematic meaning of the terms. Tagore humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of interpersonal relationship. He has reflected comprehensively and intensely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation to nature and to modes of inter personal relationship

Rabindranath Tagore was not a systematic philosopher, but the worldview behind his works and his ideas are complex as well as original. He developed a spiritual humanism that connected ancient Indian philosophical ideas with Western ideas and gave them his own original twist. He believed that human beings could fulfil their potential and find freedom and fulfilment through love, knowledge and freedom, if they succeeded in connecting their narrow self with the universal Being.

Was Tagore a philosopher?

Tagore did not write a systematic philosophical treatise but authored many essays and lectures in

which he depicts his worldview in a poetic way. Radhakrishnan writes about Tagore's philosophy:

"It is a sigh of the soul rather than a reasoned account of metaphysics; an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy. But we feel that the atmosphere is charged with a particular vision of reality. Though poetry is not philosophy, it is possible for us to derive from Rabindranath's works his philosophical views." [1]

Radhakrishnan also argues:

"Though it is not the aim of poetry as a species of art to tell us of a philosophy, still it cannot fulfil its purpose unless it embodies a philosophic vision. It must offer an interpretation of life, give us a fuller view of reality. Poetry would not delight and give joy if it did not reveal the eternal through its form." [2]

Tagore himself admits his own "ignorance of philosophy". [3] Yet he was also convinced that "poetry naturally falls within the scope of a philosopher, when his reason is illumined into a vision". [4] Through his poetry, Tagore strove to communicate his vision of reality.

Influences of Indian philosophy on Tagore's ideas

Rabindranath Tagore's family's outlook on religion and life was influenced by the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita (cf. Brahmo Samaj). When Rabindranath was twelve and went to the Himalayas with his father, they chanted the Upanishads together. His father insisted that he should know the verses by heart. Rabindranath Tagore's writings are full of references to the Upanishads.

The Upanishads are a collection of writings that were originally orally transmitted. According to the most prevalent interpretation, there are 108 Upanishads, of which between 10 and 14 have been identified as orthodox (Mukhya). Most consider the Upanishads to form a part of the Vedas, others see it as separate, as they were most likely critical reactions to earlier (more pluralistic) interpretations of the Vedas. Upanishad literally means "sitting down near" or "sitting close to", and implies listening closely to the mystic doctrines of a guru. It has also been translated as "secret wisdom" that include philosophical discussions of concepts such as:

Salvation (moksha/mukti), ultimate reality (brahman), the individual soul (atman), religion, duty, essence (dharma). The Upanishads build the foundation of what is called Vedanta (which means "the end of the Veda" – goal, conclusion, highest aim). The term Vedanta used to refer only to the Upanishads but later also included its interpretations (next to the Bhagavadgita and the Brahma-Sutra).

Further important influences on Tagore's worldview consist in the religion of the Bauls, a group of mystic minstrels from Bengal, and Vaishnavism, a Hindu sect.

Man and Nature Relationship:

According to Tagore there are essentially two senses in which we can think of our relationship with nature—one in which we ordinarily treat it as an unconscious objective mode for information, binding down man to the physical and essential needs; and the other in which it satisfies our personality with expression that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of, colours, forms, sounds and movements. He argues that we are face to face with this world and our relations with nature are manifold. We always come in touch with Nature to fulfill our needs. With nature Man has a very good communication. Nature helps man to develop his personality as much as man helps nature to reveal its beauty. Man grows along with nature in so far as he can identify himself with nature, and makes it his messenger of communication. With the help of nature man creates his own nature, beauty, and art. In his creativity and self-expression, man becomes conscious about his diversity, his capability to go beyond his physical finitude and through creation of art, strives to send his communication to the Supreme Person who reveals himself to him. As a form of communication inter-relation between man and nature has two levels—one is cognitive and the other is existential. At the cognitive level, nature contributes to knowledge not as an externality but as expressed to man. Tagore writes, "All our knowledge of things knows them in their relation to the Universe, in that relation which is truth." But man due to his day today activities, forgets that nature is his. It is not because that the nature has grown out of touch with us, rather, we do not perceive nature in its aspect of unity; we are driven to destruction by our focus on the fragmentary. He laments that, "we grow out of touch with this great truth, we forget to accept its invitation and its hospitality, when in quest of external success our works become unspiritual and unexpressive." Tagore also quotes here Wordsworth's line: The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Little we see in Nature that is ours.2

Tagore's Philosophical Anthropology

The most central theme in Tagore's philosophy is the human being, his or her potential and the question of how this potential can be reached. These are

questions that are dealt with by what is called philosophical anthropology.

For Tagore, the beginning of the world is a story of creation as well as evolution. He uses scientific models, while ascribing the forces that cause evolution to God's powers. For Tagore, God has two aspects: One is a monotheistic personal God, the other is brahman, which can be translated as being, consciousness, bliss, supreme reality, and All.

According to Indian cosmology, the world came into being because God, who was first one, divided himself and manifested himself in the eternal. Tagore quotes the old texts: "From love the world is born, by love it is sustained, towards love it moves, and into love it enters." In Sanskrit, the creation from love is called lila, the spontaneous game of love, and Tagore uses this word and idea in many of his writings. God wants to create; he is prepared to sacrifice his joy and to limit his limitlessness,[5] because he will be able to realize himself, his personality, by giving himself:[6, 7]

"This joy, whose other name is love, must by its very nature have duality for its realization. (...) The lover seeks his own other self in his beloved. It is the joy that creates this separation, in order to realise through obstacles the union".[8]

Through evolution, many different animals emerged. Humans are, according to Tagore, freer than any other being on Earth: they have reached an unprecedented high level of physical freedom regarding their senses, their tools as well as their habitat,[9] because their physique is left "unfinished (...), undraped, undecorated, unarmoured and without weapons".[10] They therefore had the opportunity as well as the obligation to imagine and create tools, protection, and ways to procure food.[11]

But humans use their unique mental abilities not only for the necessities of life but also for trying "to prove that they are not a mere living catalogue of endless wants; that there is in them an ideal of perfection, a sense of unity, which is a harmony between parts and a harmony with surroundings".[12] Tagore called the skills and activities beyond pragmatic necessities surplus.[13]

He referred to the Atharvaveda to explain that "[i]n that surplus is all that is supreme in man".[14] This old religious text says that "[r]ighteousness, truth, great endeavours, empire, religion, enterprise,

heroism and prosperity, the past and the future, dwell in the surpassing strength of the surplus."[15]

These themes have in common that they all go beyond the individual life and physical limits. The uniquely human surplus, being a "fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with his self-preservation,"[16] allows humans to reflect and to be creative and therefore to formulate ideals that are of permanent value and transcend the limitations of finiteness.[17]

Human Beings' Search for Freedom – Freedom from the Self?

The human surplus, according to Tagore, results in constant longing for freedom and fulfilment. But how can they find it? What is true freedom?

Tagore looks at different kinds of freedom. For him, freedom in the mere physical realm is licence or negative freedom, because complete freedom can never be reached, as there is always "more." Tagore therefore comes to the conclusion that freedom cannot lie in the material and temporal. In India, the discussion about freedom traditionally refers to freedom from the self and has, in some traditions, led to asceticism and transcendentalism.

Yet Tagore is convinced that "freedom has no content, and therefore no meaning, where it has nothing but itself".[xviii] Mere nothingness would not lead to the fulfilling freedom humans are looking for. Tagore quotes the Isha Upanishad, which, according to his interpretation, cautions the reader not to focus exclusively on the infinite, because "the absolute infinite is emptiness" and "the sole pursuit of the infinite leads to (...) darkness".[19]

If fulfilling freedom isn't possible in the material finite world, nor in the realm of the infinite, how can we find it? The answer lies in the connection of the finite and the infinite. It is written in the Isha Upanishad, as translated by Tagore:

"They enter the region of darkness who pursue the transitory. But they enter the region of still greater darkness who pursue the eternal. He who knows the transitory and the eternal combined together crosses the steps of death by the help of the transitory and reaches immortality by the help of the eternal."[20]

"Only as long as the self is separated it leads to suffering and is trapped in its finiteness, but as soon as it connects and transcends itself, our self isn't narrow anymore but finds itself in the whole world. The finite must not be abandoned in favour of the

infinite, because to reject the finite would mean to reject the foundation and expression of the infinite.[21, 22]

To Tagore, finiteness consists in forms, while the infinite is an idea. This distinction has been made in philosophy ever since Plato's allegory of the cave. Plato, too, emphasizes the truth of the idea compared to its shadows or apparitions. Tagore, however, does not maintain the clear-cut dichotomy between idea and form, but emphasizes their interdependence and develops a synthesis of the two:

"For revealment of idea, form is absolutely necessary. But the idea which is infinite cannot be expressed in forms which are absolutely finite. Therefore forms must always move and change, they must necessarily die to reveal the deathless. The expression as expression must be definite, which it can only be in its form ; but at the same time, as the expression of the infinite, it must be indefinite, which it can only be in its movement. Therefore when the world takes its shape it always transcends its shape ; it carelessly runs out of itself to say that its meaning is more than what it can contain." [23]

Infinite Freedom

According to Tagore, we need to free our selves from what shackles the self, not from the self itself. We can do this by focusing on the infinite instead of on the finite, but have to do this through our individuality.

To find fulfilment and to liberate ourselves truly it is hence necessary to reach unity, *advaitam*, with the infinite through our individual self. We have to actualize the famous words *tat tvam asi* (Thou art that) through our personal self, by dedicating it instead of negating it.[24] What we need to do to find fulfilling freedom is therefore to recognize *brahman* and express this vision, to formulate higher ideals and act according to them, and to connect with the world emotionally and spiritually. This means, that the goal of freedom can be achieved by the expression of the human surplus.

Tagore illustrates this through the image of an oil lamp:[25] If a lamp hoards its oil it cannot fulfil its purpose; it is separated from everything and does not find its meaning. It needs to give up its oil and sacrifice it, yet it should not do so in a purposeless way, as this would lead to even darker poverty. Instead, when the lamp is lighted, it should find its meaning by establishing a relation with the world. The sacrifice of its oil is therefore its fulfilment.

Likewise, if we only hoard what we own – material as well as ideational –, our self remains in darkness

and suffers due to its selfishness. We need to dedicate our "oil" to light our lamp and thereby establish a relation to everything near and far. We need to treat our self not as ultimate purpose but as our means, our vessel, which doesn't merely hoard but carries its contents as a "sacrifice to the altar".[26] Like an oil lamp, humans should burn in their individual way to dedicate their selves to the world.

Tagore's approach can be summarized as "spiritual humanism,"[27] because it is a form of spirituality rooted in this world and centred on human beings. He argued that the goal of unity between self and world does not entail denying the individual-human and the loss of the self. He wanted to retain individuality despite the imperative of overcoming the self. Humans will find fulfilment and freedom when they overcome their narrow self but, at the same time, retain individuality.

Paths to Fulfilment

Transcendence of the self can be realised through the search for knowledge, through creative work, and through love. In *Religion of Man*, Tagore wrote that "the largest wealth of the human soul has been produced through sympathy and cooperation; through disinterested pursuit of knowledge (...); through service." [28] This is Tagore's reformulation of the "paths" (*marga*) to salvation proposed in the *Bhagavad-*

Gita: *jnana* (knowledge/insight), *karman* (action, esp. sacrifice), and *bhakti* (devotion).

For these three principles, Tagore also used the Indian terms *santam* *sivam* *advaitam*, which he translated as "the perfect repose in truth, (...) the perfect activity in goodness, and (...) the perfect union in love." [29] These fields, according to Tagore, address the most important elements of human personality, namely, the mind, the emotions, and the will.

Love

For Tagore, love is the supreme path, because love is emblematic for connectedness and unity. It achieves a harmony between opposites without the need to dissolve opposing forces. Tagore therefore calls love "integrated essence." [30] Love is thus a unique state of being, because the loving and the loved are connected yet separate; it realizes both unity and difference.

When Tagore wrote about love, he meant love for God, for all humans, and for nature. All of these are abstract ideas, yet Tagore also argued that love needs to be personal. It should therefore be initially directed

towards what is near to us and then be extended until it encompasses the whole world.

Tagore uses the same word for joy and love: "This joy, whose other name is love, must by its very nature have duality for its realisation. (...) The lover seeks his own other self in his beloved. It is the joy that creates this separation, in order to realise through obstacles of union." [31]

Knowledge (jnana)

Knowledge has the potential to free from intellectual, economic, and social limitations by bringing humans into truth. While in the Gita, knowledge mostly refers to self-knowledge, Tagore widens the meaning by including other aspects of knowledge that should all consist in discovering the infinite behind finite facts. Therefore, science helps to emancipates the mind, while superstition keeps unfree:

"Science may truly be described as mysticism in the realm of material knowledge. It helps us to go beyond appearances and reach the inner reality of things in principles which are abstractions; it emancipates our mind from the thralldom of the senses to the freedom or reason." [32]

At the same time, Tagore values spontaneous inspiration higher than rational analysis, [33] because knowledge can mean mere accumulation and analysis of separated facts.

Action (karma)

In Indian thought, karma (action) is usually understood as shackles. Tagore repeats arguments from the Gita that discusses this problem at length:

"The Gita says action we must have, for only in action do we manifest our nature. But this manifestation is not perfect so long as our action is not free. In fact, our nature is obscured by work done by the compulsion of want or fear. (...) our true freedom is not the freedom from action but freedom in action, which can only be attained in the work of love." [34]

While actions will continue to shackle the self if they are motivated by selfish reasons, acting can lead us to fulfilment [35] when it is, firstly, not motivated by want and, secondly, when we are ready to give up the fruit of our actions, as the Bhagavad Gita has put it: "the deeds that are done solely for the sake of self fetter our soul; the disinterested action, performed for the sake of the giving up of self, is the true sacrifice." [36]

Through true sacrifice, action becomes pure joy and charts the path to unity with Brahma. [37] This is the easiest in creative rather than constructive work. [38] Tagore did not confine the concept "creative work" to the fine arts but also included the formation of

personality and of society. [39] Tagore sees humans as creators:

"The ultimate truth of our personality is that we are no mere biologists or geometricians; "we are the dreamers of dreams, we are the music-makers." This dreaming or music-making is not a function of the lotus-eaters, it is the creative impulse which makes songs not only with words and tunes, lines and colours, but with stones and metals, with ideas and men." [40]

Within art, the artists' task is, according to Tagore, to translate "his joy into forms" [41] and to find finite expressions of the infinite the artist is experiencing.

Conclusion

Though Tagore's writings are mostly poetic rather than philosophical treatises, he has a comprehensive, consistent and original worldview that permeates all of his works, ideas and activism. In the centre of it stands the human being and his or her potential, which can be achieved through a unity of the individual with the larger community, with nature, with the world.

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8. Tagore tries to explain to his British friend Andrews, who spent much of his life time in Tagore's ashram, why God created the world: "The Infinite Being is not complete if He remains absolutely infinite. He must realize himself through the finite; that is, through creation. (...) You cannot ask why it should be

- why the Infinite should attain truth by passing through the finitude; why the joy should be the cause of suffering, in order to come back to itself – for it is so. And when our minds are illumined, we feel glad that it is so.” Tagore, R. 2006 [1928]. “Letters to a Friend.” In *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Volume 3. A Miscellany. Edited by Sisir Kumar Das. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 247.
8. Tagore, R. *Sadhana*. Fairfield: First World Library. 2005 (1913), 401-483, p. 87 [Hereafter: *Sadhana*]; cf. Tagore, Rabindranath 2003. *Gitanjali*. Song Offerings: a collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali manuscript. New Delhi: UBSPD, in association with Visva-Bharati, poem 56.
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 22. There is an infinite aspect in everything, namely a chain of relationship between its changing forms, while these transitory aspects themselves only represent their negative sides (*Personality*, p. 79). Tagore compares this with a story book in which sentences are separate

but also connected and therefore able to form a meaningful whole (*ibid.*). Infinity hence does not exclude finiteness, but the opposite is the case: “infinity is a continuously renewing finitude” (*Religion of Man*, p. 52).