Devotional Songs of ‘Gitanjali’ by Rabindranath Tagore

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Rabindranath Tagore was an eminent, outstanding and great poet of the Twentieth century of Indo-Anglian Literature. He was called ‘Maharishi’. He is also remembered as an educator who founded Visva Bharti University in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. Tagore is an excellent example of Renaissance man, one skilled in many fields of endeavour. Being an educator, he has always dreamt of a harmony of Universal Humanity. He composed several songs and in 1929 he began painting. He wrote many books of poetry. The most famous one was ‘Gitanjali’ (Song Offerings). It is a collection of English poems and it is also a translated version of Bengali poems. This collection of poems is very famous in West Bengal. This book caused a literary sensation and in the following year in 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his wonderful creation.

In each and every part of ‘Gitanjali’, we find the element of Mysticism. Like all mystics, he was a firm believer in the essential unity of man and the external universe. Each stanza reflects the portrait of the Supreme power i.e. the omnipotent God. In Gitanjali, we find that there are the devotional hymns of a dedicated soul whose ultimate aim is the realization of the divine. In his voyage through life, the poet realizes divinity in man and receives the glimpses of ‘the Infinite in the midst of Finite.’ Through his greatful writings, he showed a non-stop quest of pure mysticism and spirituality. He simply believed that –“True knowledge is that which perceives the unity of all things in God.” Due to his great contribution to Literature, he carved his place in Modern Indian Literature. There is no doubt that ‘Gitanjali’ is a proof of Tagore’s towering genius and marvelous artistic predilection. In this regard, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out that; “The Gitanjali songs are mainly poems of bhakti in the great Indian Tradition.... The current coin of India’s devotional poetry is melted and minted anew by Rabindranath but the pure gold shines as brightly as ever, even though the inscription on the coin is English.”

Gitanjali is primarily a collection of 103 devotional songs. It has been written in lyric tradition of Vaishnav Hinduism. The influence of study of Upanishads which he undertook accompanying his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore is clearly seen in the spiritual contour of the songs. As a text, Gitanjali focuses upon how divine revelation should lead the seeker to a highly developed sense of reason. Tagore’s version of ecstatic worship is so thoroughly meditative that it leads towards cultivation of reason and asserts that one of the highest lights of divine love is reaching a condition of the mind wherein reason is permitted reign. He writes in the poem, “Purity” _ ‘I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.” (Line-4-7)

The relationship between God and Man is the apparent core of all the songs. In ‘Gitanjali’ we find tagore’s universality. In each and every stanza of the book, we find the beautiful
element of Mysticism and Spiritualism. Tagore tries to establish an inseparable link individual
soul and greater soul. His meditations on God, man and nature, in the Gitanjali, not only echo the
Vedantic awareness of the Absolute but also transmit the fervor of a Vaishnava bhakta’s love
God. Nature and man are, in the Vedantic terminology, Prakriti and Purusha, the two aspects of
the Absolute. Meditation on nature or an aspect of nature leads to realization of God. It
ennobles man. Man is ultimately bound up with nature.

K R Srinivasa rightly points out-

“Gitanjali songs are mainly poems of bhakti in the great Indian
Tradition……… The imagery, the conceits, the basic experience, the longing,
the trial, the promise, the realization- all have the quaintly unique Indian
flavor and taste.”

In every stanza of Gitanjali, he shows his gratitude to God. He also feels that God has
appointed him to accomplish a poet’s task. He has offered his poems at the feet of the Divine
giver of inspiration. According to him, while praying we do not always plead for something,
sometimes we praise our God and sometimes we share our sorrows and joys. According to him,
“Prayer is the means to achieve the inner harmony and peace.” Because it is his personal
experience that one can be benefitted by making prayer. He also gives the example that in the
Ramayana, just as Ravana through constant utterance of prayers wins the favour of Lord Shiva,
In the same way, the Muses (the Goddess of Poetry) are convinced by the sincere attempts and
efforts of a poet. But this type of spiritual endeavour made by the poet can not be understood by
all. The very opening line of ‘Gitanjali’ reflects the inner harmony that the poet has experienced.
The words are the outburst endeavouring to articulate intense pleasure that the poetic experience
has conferred upon him-

“Thou hast made me endless such is thy pleasure.
This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.”

(I)

It also shows that God has also imparted him poetic inspiration for making and creating
new poetry. Gitanjali represents the journey of his life from ‘Finite To Infinite’. The songs in
Gitanjali embrace the whole gamut of tender human feelings- love, humility, detachment
,devotion, affection, dejection and gratitude. He also feels that life is a journey and he is himself
is a traveler who has completed his task before the voyage is ended. Mr. tagore, like the Indian
civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to the spontaneity.”
Further he also remarked that “A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us,
seem to have been taken up into this imagination………………”

William Butler Yeats, in an introduction of Gitanjali said,

‘Humility for Tagore is the mean of communion with the Master who sits on the throne;
“Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest and lost.”

(X)

Gitanjali is a poem of detachment and the earthly defenses crumble in it. Nor earth but supernal
regions tems the poets soul-

“I know that the day will come when my sight of this earth shall de lost, and life
will take its leave in silence, drawing the last curtain over my eyes. ( XCII)

The journey to infinite ends with complete surrender. Tagore had always dreamt of a
harmony of universal humanity among the people of different origin through freedom of mind
and spiritual sovereignty. In Gitanjali, he devotes everything and every possible effort to the Almighty-

“In one salutation to thee, my God, Let all
My senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet.” (C111)

There is no doubt that Tagore was a solitary pilgrim whose quest was nothing but ceaseless bliss, that which is beyond mundane faculties of experience. The poet’s solitude in the poem is his mystical path that teaches him how to tend to his higher self- the part of the personality-that reaches from mind, consciousness, down to the soul, the breath of life. In fact what the poet is awaiting is knowledge and insight of mystical truth. He devoted all his life in search of transnational and universal form of religious and spiritual expression, rooted at the same time in Indian Ethos-

“This is my prayer to Thee, my lord-strike; strike at the root of penury in my heart-give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love”. (XXXV1)

In his essay ‘silent poet, untaught poet’, Tagore makes an important and significant statement with regard to the poet’s rites that must be performed faultlessly-“A powerful imagination does not by itself make a poet. It must be trained and refined imagination of a high order. There should be the intellect and the taste to employ the imagination to good purpose.” Even goes on to say later, “The imagination too, like everything else requires training. An imagination without proper training reveals in the extravagant, the impossible, the preternatural.”

Therefore, a poet has to develop a religious discipline in order to reach the state of perfection. Praying for inspiration, offering one’s songs to the ‘Divine giver of inspiration and constantly training oneself for the complete art of poetry writing are the rites that a poet must faultlessly performed. It is not an easy path to pursue-

“It is the most distant course that comes closest to thyself, and the Training is most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.”

Thus, the poet has shown the marvelous glory of God i.e. infinite among the finite. He remains a thirsty traveler always seeking for Divine drink. It also seemingly inherent to Tagore’s poems is a remarkable sense of how the mystical need not destroy the personal, including the most personal dimensions of self, that the personality. There is a misnomer that mysticism in a religion equates to an annihilation of the personality, but this is not always the case. Tagore’s poetry abundantly demonstrates the variety of personal mysticism and so we may also find ourselves asking- what was Tagore’s view of God? For Tagore, God is ever-present, hiding but desirous of being found. Throughout the Gitanjali, his mystic vision is of superb rank. John Wright Buckman, also once wrote-“The mystical experience, broadly interpreted leads by its very nature to the heart of personality, and that , not only does the mystical experience awaken and develop selfhood, it opens the channels to other selves and makes possible the truest and deepest personal communioin.”

Besides it, in poetry, the spiritual aspects are subtly woven, the poet never preaches overtly. His spiritual vision, as he himself said, is imbued, “with the ancient spirit of India as
revealed in our sacred texts and manifested in the life of today. Tagore through his vast body of immortal literary works taught us that-

“The universe is a manifestation of God and there is no unbridgeable gulf between our world and God’s. And that god is the one who can provide the greatest love and joy.”

Infact, it is true that a poet can never completely transfer his experience into words and the relationship that he shares with the divine forces remains a mystery forever-

“I put my tales of you into lasting songs. The secret gushes out of my heart.”

In the essay called ‘The poet’s Religion’ Tagore says: (excerpts from page 3-26)

“Through creation man expresses his truth; through that expression he gains back his truth in its fullness. But the poet in man knows that reality is a creation and human reality has to be called forth which is creative. The great world… has its call for us. The call has ever roused the creator in man, and urged him to reveal the truth, to reveal the Infinite in himself.”

Praising Tagore’s poetry, Swami Adiswarananda writes in his preface-

“The inner- seeking spirituality of India infused all of Tagore’s writings………..

The values and core beliefs of the Hindu scriptures permeated his work.”

“Tagore’s philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture and nationality.”

Thus, it is his own recognisition of writing for which Tagore should always be remembered till many ages. In his songs, Tagore tried to find inner calm, a bliss that comes only with the experience of divine, and tried to explore the themes of divine and human love-

“When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose touch of the one in the play of the many.”

(CXIII)

In short, Tagore’ poetry teaches us how to love God. At last, it can be concluded that Tagore’s poetry is highly, deeply religious and imbued with his love of nature and his homeland. Swami Adiswarananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, in his preface to Tagore; “The Phystic Poets’writes.” The inner seeking spirituality of India infused all of Tagore’s writing. He wrote in many genres of the deep religion milieu of Hinduism. The values and core beliefs of the Hindu scripture permeated his work.” He further writes-“Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture and nationality. In his writing, the poet and mystic takes us on a spiritual quest and gives us a glimpse of the infinite in the midst of the finite, unity at the heart of all diversity and the divine in all beings and things of the universe”. His poetry can not be confined to particular creed of faith because his poetry belongs to the universe. His poetry abundantly demonstrates the variety of personal mysticism. For Tagore, God is ever- present, hiding but desirous of being found. In the opinion of Tagore himself that ‘a poet’s religion knows no boundaries, it is all- inclusive. Infact the urge to write poetry is a call of the conscience, an intuitive pursuit which not everyone is capable of committing oneself to. For both the spiritualist and the poet deliverance lies not in renunciation of the world but in such bondage; “I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.”
Infact through Tagore’s Gitanjali, we can get a glimpse of the poet’s true nature and his spiritual feelings. He does not proclaim at the poem’s end to have reached the culmination of his mystical pursuit, rather, he remains throughout this poem, someone still on the journey, still waiting on the summit, though not at the summit of mystical heights. Embodied in this work is very soul, it will continue to give out sparks of truth to the world. It is pertinent to consider Tagore’s mystical experiences in relation to the tradition of Indian mysticism as there is mystery in it, like the mystery about life and its depths can never be fathomed using language as a measure:

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

Infact, the place of Rabindranath Tagore can not be replaced by any other Indian poet. Commenting the poetry of Tagore, William Butler Yeats remarked-

“These verses…………..as the generations pass, traveler will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more better passion may bathe and renew its youth……..”

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