

MAN SPIRIT AND ETERNITY: SEEING THROUGH TAGORE

Avijit Ghosh, Research Scholar, University of North Bengal

Abstract:

This paper is written with the intent of tracing the varied trajectories that Tagore's spiritual humanist thought has taken through few of his poems: "The Golden Boat", "Africa", "Arrival", and "The Conch". These pieces not only share an overbearing strain of humanistic endeavour but also address the singular connect of man with man, and with society at large. The greater culture is discussed and Tagore endorses the trails of spiritual thought, the shared human-ness and general questions on eternity as connective tissues that bind together the human race, and make certain interactions possible. The conversation in Tagore's poems is not solely with one person, oneself, or a race. It exists as an interaction with the contemporary human conditions of life, which through his genius flourished in a dialogue with the eternal existence of man in his world.

Keywords: *Tagore, Spirit, Eternity, Human, Poetry.*

A large part of Rabindranath Tagore's poetic consciousness and realization was triggered by his fervid contact with the riverine Bengal which he experienced after his father gave him charge of the family estate including the lands of Shelidah by the river Padma. Born on several boat rides many of his poems became poetic peregrination of human life. Wading through simple experience of a cultivator on a monsoon riverside in "The Golden Boat" the reader lands upon a symbolical design taking him to the spirit of everyman which I call the Man Spirit where "the truth of his knowing rests on his actual realisation and not on the verity of any objective fact" (Chaudhury, 13).

Tagore's poetic realisation is not smeared with superficial occurrences of veristic eventuality or "the claims of necessity, the thrift of usefulness" (Tagore, Personality, 17). Overflowed with a lyrical dynamicity, his cognizance becomes inherently poetic and symbolic containing an innate realization of Truth undamaged. Flowing right from the poet's cognition of the tragic lot of Man, the lyrical tune of a monsoon day in "The Golden Boat" weaves out a sense of human pessimism and detachment. Tagore writes:

Clouds rumbling in the sky; teeming rain.
I sit on the river bank, sad and alone.
The sheaves lie gathered, harvest has ended,
The river is swollen and fierce in its flow.

As we cut the paddy it started to rain. ("The Golden Boat" lines 1-5)

The poet in Tagore who is essentially a mystic, asks, "Who is this, steering close to the shore / Singing?" ("The Golden Boat" lines 11-12). He feels that she is someone he knows. His feeling of being aware of her identity gives rise to further curiosity: "Oh to what foreign land do you sail?" ("The Golden Boat" line 16). Tagore's yearning for the knowledge of the Destination creates a kind of embryonic journey towards the Truth which invigorates a connect between the Man and Eternity. Hence when the poet pleads, "Take away my golden paddy when you sail", a connect with the Eternity is established and the poet doesn't hesitate to offer the Eternity the store of his intense labour: "Take it, take as much as you can load." ("The Golden Boat" lines 20, 21) But there is also a hunger in the poet for himself to be carried away along with his creation: "Now take me as well, be kind, take me aboard." ("The Golden Boat" line 25). The poet realizes

that the world accepts our deed, not us. We are lost in no time. The result is spiritual failure. Tagore says,

No room, no room, the boat is too small.
Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full.
Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro,
On the bare river-bank, I remain alone -

What had has gone: the golden boat took all. ("The Golden Boat" lines 26-30)

Hence, realization comes through sacrifice of the fullness of being to an Infinite, revealing that "aspect of our personality which overflows in excess of all our creaturely needs and [is] exhausted by all pressures of practical living. It is this excess in which man is most truly revealed" (Tagore, *Angel of Surplus* 101).

The poet's submission of individual self to the greater entity or the Man Spirit is prominent in his rejection of the state of subjugation to the spirit of antagonism. He called for revelation of the self to the wider humanity. Tagore wrote in a January 1913 letter to C.F. Andrews,

[t]he problem of race conflict is the greatest of all that men have been called upon to solve. . . . Different races and nations of the Earth have come nearer each other than ever they did before. But we have not been ready to accept the responsibilities of this wider humanity. Men are still under the thralldom of the spirit of antagonism which has been associated with a narrow sentiment of nationality. . . . I feel that the time has come, and after all kinds of patch-work of superficial experiments the spiritual nature of man is getting ready to take up the task and broaden the path of reconciliation of all different races and creeds. (qtd. in Collins, 119)

Tagore re-humanizes and romanticizes the "primitive man" in "Africa" primarily through introducing the Africans as an equal element of nature, and also by acknowledging the western ignorance and assumptions about their cultures, which largely cater for the tone of authority that the colonial masters had assumed, and further goes on to point out the reason of such gross misrepresentation: the white man's burden. All such complexities arise only at the end of the invaders who insist on their absolutism and fail to see the world the way it is. Their manipulation distorts their vision, and in turn traumatizes those they claim to alleviate. Written during Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 the poem projects prehistoric cultures as the vibrant nest of humanity and a path of reconciliation through peace and tranquillity. In Africa, Nature could gradually store in her utmost privacy the mysteries of wilderness, the secret magic of Nature for Man's realisation and discovery. Tagore writes:

There you slowly stored
The baffling mysteries of the wilderness
In the dark cellars of your profound privacy ("Africa" lines 8-10)

The poem doesn't superficially try to draw a contrast, as many critics claim, between the primitive/uncivilized and the civilized but between the natural and the terrible, the human and the inhuman, the sanity and social disease. Tagore ridiculed and condemned the colonist forces of the "civilised world" for their brutal distortion of human ideal through their limitless fierceness of antagonism and imperialism "whose fierceness was keener than the fangs of your wolves, / whose pride was blinder than your lightless forest" and who, by force and deceit, enslaved the people of an entire continent (Tagore, "Africa" lines 21-22). Tagore laments such undermining of the "primitive man," the symbol of universal humanity by the civilized Europeans who although took no interest in its pre-historic existence gradually and ironically were attracted by the natural resources resulting in imperialist aggression. Realizing the civilized man's wobbly repute in the orchestra of life, Tagore writes: "The savage greed of the civilized stripped naked its unashamed inhumanity" ("Africa" **line 23**). Imperialist history shows us the dust, the eddy, the swirl, the energy of the violent storm of the colonial powers-the consequential and big-league-but misses the "story" of the home, the hearth, the vibrant nest of Nature. Tagore observed: "We can grow into full manhood only if we have been nursed by earth and water, sky and air, and nourished by them as by our

mother's breasts" ("The Problem of Education" 73-4.)

But with his skewed appreciation of the anfractuous matrix of being, man is often a sinking boat drifting on the sea of ignorance. He scuffles to work himself out through a recognitive reciprocity between faith and doubt, belief and reason. Whenever we hear a knocking noise, we convince ourselves "That's only the wind, they rattle when it blows" or "it was only distant thunder" (Tagore, "Arrival" lines 8, 14). When after the day's labour, we return home in fading light, expecting none's arrival before the morning, one or two amongst us say: "...The King of Night is coming.' / We just laughed at them and said, 'No one will come 'til morning" (Tagore, "Arrival" lines 5-6). This speaks of a continuity- a rhythm is maintained in the yes and the no, the positive and the negative, the attraction and repulsion that become a part of the creative rhythm essential to our understanding of our ever rhythmic connections with Eternity. "Arrival", a devotional lyric from Kheya, the product of Tagore's mature years when his mind was gradually connecting with the Eternity declares the arrival of the King when man's mind is maladroit, his faith is torn, and his eyes can see nothing but darkness. When the king has come, -

...we made no preparation!

Alas, what shame, what destiny.

No court, no robes, no finery. (Tagore, "Arrival" lines 26-28)

Who is the King of Night? Is he the omnipresent infinite consciousness or the pure and tranquil Divine spirit that illuminates our inner being? Is He God himself who has come to take the poet to the other world? The poet's soul seems to call him: "Wake up, wake up. Delay no more" (Tagore, "Arrival" line 20). Like a faithful servant the poet prepares himself for the journey most unceremoniously. He feels that the honourable guest has arrived and it is his duty to entertain him: "Fling wide the doors and let him in to the lowly conch's boom" (Tagore, "Arrival" line 31). The poem, according to William Radice, portrays the discovery of the soul which is identified with God. In Indian tradition, soul reveals itself suddenly irrespective of our acceptance or rejection. Such sudden appearance is aromatic. "In deepest dark the King of Night has come with wind and storm." (Tagore, "Arrival" line 32) Wind and storm signify the extremities of life. Man is born not to balance but to flourish in the extremes. Tagore observes that the "perfect balance in these opposing forces would lead to deadlock in creation. Life moves in the cadence of constant adjustment of opposites; it is a perpetual process of reconciliation of contradictions" (A Vision of India's History 13).

"The Conch", the fourth poem of Balaka is about revival of will power and spiritual regeneration of humanity. The poem embodies Tagore's strict adherence to human determination in the time of crisis. Composed on the eve of World War I the poem spoke of the pain and hurt of the coming evil. The poet in Tagore could unknowingly sense the dark evil which was about to engulf humanity. His personal pain becomes collective consciousness of the whole generation after the outbreak of the World War I. It was as if the negligent fall of the holy conch into the dirt. The time was not for passive mourning, but for action to the restoration of the object of divine grace. Tagore calls for action:

...Doers,

Charge into action! Do not falter!

How can we let your inspiring conch stare up at us from the dirt?

("The Conch" line 5)

As we witness the divine conch lying in the dirt waiting to be elevated we are reminded of the spiritual regeneration blessed by the blowing of the Pancajanya. The thunder of the conch will be sanctifying as it, as the poet believes, like Krishana's shell is sure to eliminate all the evils of the universe. The thunder of the conch stands for human passion which must be allowed to run its course like the powerful overflowing Nile which cannot be stemmed by human effort. Sanctification of spirit can be realized through passion's force which is often destructive like Donne's lovers ready to die at their own cost: "We're tapers too and at our own cost die". Tagore wanted to convey his message of hope, faith,

courage and resoluteness in the face of odds. His readiness to sacrifice seems sublime at the end. Amidst the muggy milieu of uncertainty Man is a prisoner of his own limitations. Once he realizes his animality and limitations, he draws a 'realisation' that his tiny existence in the enormous scheme of the universe is important and the cistern of his wisdom never stops short from being brimful.

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