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Spiritual Insight in Tagore's Works

One of Rabindranath Tagore's most memorable poems begins with the line: "The world is Insane with violence, every day there emerges a new kind of cruel conflict". He goes on to pray to the Almighty to instil love and wisdom into a world afflicted with myriad ills. This reflects the core of Tagore's spiritual humanism.

Stressing the need for spiritual freedom, he referred to the uncontrolled excesses of passion that upset our balance and obscure the underlying harmony between the individual and universal spirit. This malady, which he called 'sin', distorts our freedom in the realms of matter, mind and spirit.

'The Religion of Man', as enunciated by Tagore, is an appeal for faith in man's sublimity, for nothing is greater than the Divine in man. In his own words: "When I was 18, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality.... That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man..... suddenly I became conscious of a stirring of soul within me. My world of experience in a moment seemed to become lighted, and facts that were detached and dim found a great unity of meaning... I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity..." This idea found expression in his poems addressed to what he called Jivan Devata, the Lord of Life.

Tagore's father, Debendranath, propagated a monotheistic religion based on the Upanishads and Rabindranath too was inspired by Advaita Vedanta. But he was too independent to adhere to the rigidity of any institutional creed or dogma. Religion for Tagore was a matter of personal conviction. He had greater faith in the individuals "all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly and act rightly, thus becoming channels of moral truth.

Tagore never wanted to be labeled a theologian or a philosopher. He was happier to be known as a poet. "Ami Kobi" (I am a poet), he would say. He felt himself one with nature and derived inspiration from it. He saw it as the physical manifestation of the Universal Spirit and expressed this experience through his poetry. His meditations on God, man and nature, especially in the Gitanjali – offerings of songs to the Infinite - not only echo the Vedantic perception of the Absolute but also convey the ardour of a Vaishnavite bhakta's love for God.

Through the eyes of a humanist, Tagore perceived a symbolic relationship between different world religions and tried to project their quintessential meaning through his writings. The eternal values of Buddhism, for instance, appealed to him as being no less significant than the Upanishadic idea of a Supreme Being. With the human spirit afflicted by greed, hatred and violence, the poet's anguished soul cried out for the healing touch of the Buddha. "O Serence, O Free / in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness / wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth."

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Tagore renounced the knighthood conferred upon him by the British in protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. While he stood by his country against all odds, he was wary of chauvinistic excesses in the name of patriotism. This is echoed by Atin, the protagonist of Tagore's short novel *Char Adhay* (Four Chapters), when he says: "that the life of the country can be saved by killing its soul, is the most monstrously false doctrine that nationalists all over the world are bellowing forth stridently". This spirit of humanism finds expression in some of his other works too, like *Ghare Baire* and *Kabuliwallah*.

The poet's invocation to the Divinity for his country's redemption in *Gitanjali* is one of his most memorable poems: "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 ever-widening thought and action-/into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake".

Tagore considered himself a solitary pilgrim in the eternal quest for boundless bliss that is perhaps beyond the realm of human experience. His life was a sustained search for a universal form of religious expression, rooted in the spirit of Indian tradition.

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