

## TAGORE AS A SOCIAL REFORMER AND HUMANIST

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**Abstract:** *Tagore appears in the realm of literature is indeed a great event. Tagore represents a family of Jorasanko where atleast a dozen internationally famous men were born. His grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore was one of the most cultured Rabinranath personalities in the British Empire to the extent of being a personal intimate friend of Queen Victoria. His illustrious father was one of the leading figures of Brahma Samaj. He was affectionately addressed as Maharshi, meaning thereby a saintly personality. His brother Satyendranath Tagore was the first member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). His nephew Abanindranath Tagore was the father of the new Art Movement in India. His sister-in-law Kadambari Devi, actually the main inspiration in the poet's literary career, was an accomplished connoisseur of art and literature. It was she who fired the imagination in the mind of young Tagore to aspire to be a poet to draw her special affection. Tagore used to stage dramas in their own Jorasanko house. They used to run their own literary family journals.*

*As far as Rabinranath Tagore was concerned, it will be too little to describe him as versatile. He was a great poet, an eminent novelist, a playwright, a great short story writer, an editor, an essayist, a great painter, a prince among patriots, a great social reformer, an educationist and above all an outstanding savant-like champion for the cause of universality of humankind. He was a towering personality-the tallest among the tall. Tagore learnt music religiously from the most illustrious musician of India Jadu Bhatta. His brother Jyotirindranath was an excellent master of music and he gave choreography to many of his songs. His nephew Surendranath Tagore and nieces Indira and Nandita were exponents of classical dance, besides being excellent musicians.*

**Key words :** *British empire, intimate friend, nephew, inspiration, patriot, humankind, social reformer*

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Rabinranath Tagore was born in 1861 in Calcutta into the wealthy and cultured family of Jorasanko. His grandfather called Prince Dwarakanath was a prosperous man of business and a keen enthusiast about the social reforms initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy. The father, Debendranath, popularly known as Maharshi or the Great Saint, was leading figure in the unitarian Brahma Samaj or Sabha founded by Rammohan. Rabinranath himself says that he was born at a time when the country was stirred by three movements. The first, which was religious, carried on a ceaseless war against superstitions. The second was literary. Under Bankimchandra it helped to free Bengali language and literature from the rigidity of effete rules and forms. The third movement, coming in the wake of the Sepoy upheaval, was largely political. It meant the awakening of the nationalist sentiment, which later on received powerful support from Rabinranath, and culminated, after decades of striving and struggle, in the attainment of independence, which, however, the poet did not live to see. A poet is born, not made, but it will be convenient to consider Tagore's achievements under the three points of view outlined above.

A prolific author, Rabinranath started writing verse even in his teens. Very soon he became the leading poet in Bengali and his songs were sung all over the province. His output was large, and his lyrics produced a deep impression by their sweetness and force. He did not altogether break with tradition and freely acknowledged his debt to Kalidasa and to the Vaishnava lyric poets as also to Bankimchandra in prose. But no poet was more original than he, and he was an experimenter with forms to the last day of his life, enriching Bengali music with new tunes and Bengali literature with newer and newer modes of expression. His originality in poetry was twofold. No poet, not even Keats was more in love with the earth and sang with greater intimacy of earthly beauty. And yet outward beauty led him constantly to the Formless, the Infinite, which reveals itself in a network of forms. It is this unique combination of sensuousness and mysticism that gives him a place amongst the most original poets of the world.

The new light of reformation movement came from the window of the Tagores of Jorasanko and it is no wonder that he was the first recipient of the coveted Nobel Award for literature, the first Asian to get such recognition. Critics will agree that many of his later literary pieces had surpassed Tagore's own Gitanjali. He suffered mentally a lot due to literary rivals malicious bitter criticism. He was confronted with many family tragedies. He tasted the hazards and joys of life. So seems Tagore is describing his readers' own personal joy and suffering of every day's life. Tagore's poems represent hope and aspiration of humankind. Rabinranath Tagore had written more than two thousand two hundred poems. They were given tunes mostly by the poet himself. A compilation under the title Gitabitan was not

liked by the Poet because in a hurry all the poems were jumbled up in an unruly compilation. Towards the end of his life the Poet himself took up the task of classifying the songs under different categories.

He categorized them under Puja (Prayer Songs or Hymns), Parinaya (Love Lyrics), Swadesh (Patriotism), Prem (Love Songs), Prakirti (on Nature specially on the six seasons), Bichitra (miscellaneous) and Amusthhaniky connected with events. They were again sub-divided by the poet himself. A contemporary scholar who was quite close to the Poet. Professor Sudhir Kar tells us how days after days the poet would be spending all his energy in the arduous task of scanning each poem and classifying it under separate categories.

More than five hundred songs were on love. These romantic songs were either parts of interlocutory dance dramas by the poet or written on request. The rest were written on his own. Most surprisingly, a majority of these romantic songs were written after the poet crossed forty! The one volume edition of *Gitcibitan* came out duly arranged six months after the poet's demise.

By and large, Tagore's greatest contribution to world thinking and understanding is his vision of a world family. Very much like Sri Aurobindo, the great saint of Pondicherry, Tagore had been dreaming of bringing the world nearer. That was the main idea behind his setting up of the World University-Visva Bharati at Santinikeian. He declared with the greatest joy and ecstasy "this is Visva Bharati where the world makes a home in a single nest." Tagore made it clear that "Knowledge flows in two streams from the East and from the West. In their unity is perceived the oneness of Truth that pervades and sustains the entire universe. This we avow."

"In the realization of this one-ness of Truth lies mighty gain, perfect peace and profound good of Man. This we truly believe." These are the mottos of the Poet's World University at Santiniketan.

Tagore was not merely a visionary. He had a practical approach for everything. In his own life he had some of the best friends who hailed from both East and West. If one cares to read the intimate letters or descriptions or appreciations by his western friends one is struck with a deep feeling of wonder. It is indeed something very rare. The letters, for instance, from Yeats or William Rothensteine or from Earnest Rhys or Stopford A. Brooke, or Nicholas Roerich, C.F. Andrews or W.W. Pearson or M. Winternitz or his conversation with Romain Rolland show their great affectionate regards for the poet. They became almost parts of the same family. Tagore had a magnetic charm. He had a tremendous power of attraction. He was accepted by many as the idol of their hearts. Some even expressed their reverence for him as they had for Lord Christ.

Even persons who met him for a short while could not ignore his charm. For instance, during his stay in America for the first time for six months, among his many new friends was Harriet Monroe. He was the Editor of *Poetry*, a Chicago magazine of verse and was the first to publish six of Rabindranath's *Gitanjali* poems in English, outside India. That was much before the Nobel Award to the poet. Obviously Monroe had every reason to be proud to felicitate the poet when for the same poems he got world's most coveted prize. In a letter from Chicago ten days after the declaration of the Nobel Award to Tagore, Monroe wrote "my most ardent felicitations upon this new honour which has been accorded you! You may imagine with what joy I received the news at the *Tribune* office one afternoon, the day before it was published. It was a great day for all your friends here.

"Monroe thought Americans felt "it was a great day for the world". Very proudly he wrote, "*Poetry* felt very proud indeed of having been the first American magazine to present you to its readers." It became a fashion everywhere to carry a copy of *Gitanjali* among the *elite* throughout the world. Many of his distant alien disciples started quoting his own lines in their letters. "Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles." They have recorded how they recited him at night. Helen Meyer Franck, who translated Tagore's poems into German and brought out a collected edition of his works in 1921 records how she recited poems from *Gitanjali* at night as a prayer psalm. Similarly Madame Jimenez translated Rabindranath's works into Spanish in collaboration with her illustrious husband Juan Ramon Jimenez who also won the Nobel Prize in 1956. She used to write letters to the Poet regularly from Madrid. Pearson considered Tagore a manifestation of Christ. C.F. Andrews in every letter addressed the Poet as "the dearest and best friend in the world".

In a personal letter he records, "for the moment your name is called or an audience can be found who will listen to your name, my own personality is raised a hundred fold." From Paris came Sylvain Levi and from Rome Prof. Tucci. Levi writes, "what a sweet time we had listening to your songs, to your music, there is no power of evocation more efficient in the world than music, pictures and words reach eyes and mind and heart, music appeals to the whole self." Tagore's poems were given tunes by himself. One of the greatest exponents of Rabindra Sangeet, Prof. Dhurjati Mukherjee writes, "Tagore is no mere writer of songs as many would wrongly believe. Excepting some of the very early period he has seldom written a poem to be set to music at leisure. Poems and their musical forms came to him complete at one and the same moment." This is definitely the result of a divine gift.

## 2. CONCLUSION :

His equally talented elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore too helped him. *Rabindra Sangeet* have the universal appeal everywhere because they reflect the inner voice of the explorers of secret Truth. The savants and sages in their great agony to enkindle the inner glow of enlightenment spent their lives in meditations. Tagore's whole family had the regular drill of silent meditation for hours. His father was addressed as *Maharshi* meaning thereby a great saint,

because of his deep spiritual pursuit. Tagore's Mother used to ask the child Rabindranath to read out loudly the great epic like the *Ramayana* and the *Maha- bharata*.

Maharshi Devendranath Tagore gave him regular lessons on the *Upanishads* specially when the child had accompanied him at *Dalhousie*, a hill resort on the lap of the Himalayas. So he could recite many of the passages from this great scriptures. It was also here that the poet was introduced to the philosophy of the Founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak Dev. He would visit a *Gurudwara* or the Sikh temples there with his father. Later on many of the original poems of the Sikh Guru Nanak Devji got reflected in his poems and songs. They are sung mostly in the classical style even in the temples as daily prayers.

One of the poet's very close associates Acharya Kshiti- mohan Sen tells us "very early in life Rabindranath had made a careful study of the *Upanishadas*; his own spiritual career, his *sadhana* had found in them inspiration and sustenance. No wonder that many of their ideas have often crept into some of his sermons and religious songs as well." In *Naivedya* some of the songs are *ad verbatim* transliteration of the poems in the *Rig Vedas* or the *Upanishadas*.

It is also from here that the Poet draws his inspiration to describe man as God. Very much like the great American poet Walt Whitman, whom he used to read quite often and who was a contemporary of his illustrious father Rabindranath wrote, "God spreads His own seat in the midst of humanity at large. He accompanies them in their rise and fall and their joys and suffering. One must serve and worship Him there in the proper place of his Tesicence. But we. remain ever blind to this fact and seek him in vain in man-made temples and ideals."

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