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Man and Being: Exploring the Idea of Man in Rabindranath Tagore and Jean -Paul Sartre

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Abstract: This paper proposes to examine, compare, and contrast the philosophical conceptions of "man" in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, a spiritual humanist rooted in Indian tradition, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading figure of 20th-century Existentialism. While Tagore visualizes Man as inherently divine and integrally connected to the universal spirit, Sartre famously declares that "existence precedes essence," asserting radical freedom, Responsibility, and alienation in a godless universe. This comparative study highlights and examines how both thinkers engage deeply with the question of human essence and existence, as well as their freedom to cultivate and design it. However, they arrive at strikingly different metaphysical and ethical conclusions. We have limited our study to Rabindranath Tagore's 'Religion of Man' and 'Sadhana', as well as J.J. Sartre's 'Existentialism and Humanism' and 'Being and Nothingness'. We have adopted a critical and analytical approach in conducting our study of the notion of 'Man' used by both these thinkers. The study in the current Global context is very relevant, as we are continuously redefining and reassessing the essence of a man. We are contrasting him against Technological advancement and Global politics, where the essence and dignity of a Man are subjected to ruthless measures. Through this study, we have attempted to understand the core philosophy that should guide the Notion of a Man. Moreover, we address the problems closely related to Human existence and society.

Key Words: Humanism, Freedom, Responsibility, Alienation, Universal Spirit.

1. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical inquiry into the nature of Man has occupied thinkers across cultures. In Indian thought, humans are often seen as microcosms of the cosmos and the divine. In contrast, Western existentialists, such as Sartre, base their philosophy on the Individual's confrontation with freedom, meaninglessness, and the necessity of making choices. Tagore and Sartre stand on opposite poles of this spectrum: Tagore's integrative spiritualism versus Sartre's atheistic Existentialism. However, both grapple with the core question: What does it mean to be human?

In the following sections, the Concept of Man from a particular perspective will be discussed and examined. Finally, we will conduct a comparative study to understand the basis of both perspectives.

2. Tagore's Concept of Man

From ancient times, Man has searched for answers to the question, "What am I?" Human beings, even in their primitive stage, are never satisfied with their Biological needs alone, like animals. They wanted to know what his true nature was and what the aim and purpose of his life were. The Being, in whatever form he is conceived as, is, nevertheless, a complex being who can evolve into a psychological being. Another important aspect of Humanity is that humans are social and moral beings; at times, they sacrifice their egoistic impulses for the sake of society. As a religious person, he seeks support from a greater Being, such as God, in his life. Again, he can be said to be a spiritual being when he realizes that, eventually, all Humanity and even all creatures will be made the objects of compassion because all of them are



equally subjected to various types of pain and psychological grief. However, there exists after death, and that is his soul or spirit. Thus, Man is endowed with complexities.

While accepting Man as a material, psychological, social, and moral Being at a time, for Tagore, what is important is the moral and spiritual aspects of Man's nature. His thinking in this context demonstrates the immense influence of Upanishadic philosophy. Similarly, he was greatly influenced by the Bauls and Saints of the medieval age.

A being that stands as a unification of matter and spirit is constantly in search of its true nature. The presence of spirit in him reminds him of his difference from other material beings, yet he remains deeply rooted in his material existence. Throughout his life, he struggles to stand apart from his material existence. As he realizes the real fulfillment lies in his identity as a spiritual being distinct from matter.

Thus, the fundamental nature of Man is the glory hidden within him; it is not extrinsic but intrinsic. All his outward, mundane activities cannot fully reveal his true nature. He is on a continuous journey in search of a path that can help him discover his true identity. His capacity to realize his actual spiritual existence also reveals the presence of dualism, characterized by difficulties in both material and spiritual existence, which are inherent in the path of actual realization. Tagore believes that the state of a being, as he experiences it directly, is not the actual state of Being. Tagore says, "When a man begins to have an extended vision of his true self, when he realizes that he is more than what he presently is, he becomes conscious of his moral nature. Then he grows aware of that which he is yet to be, and the state not yet experienced by him becomes more real than that under his direct experience" (*R. N. Tagore, Sadhana, pg 44*). When the moral nature of Man takes prominence, he distinguishes between "Will" and "wish, what is 'Desirable' and 'Good."

Humans possess both higher and lower aspects of their nature. What is lower and imperfect in him wants pleasure in the satisfaction of his immediate sensual pleasures. However, the higher the absolute Being of Man knows that will, which is the supreme wish of the larger life, is greater than mere wishes, and thus, he seeks a path leading to the ultimate Good and supreme wish.

The nature of Man, according to Tagore, is not imperfect but incomplete. That is because his true nature is not revealed in his limited mundane condition. His true nature is camouflaged under his selfish, immoral projection. However, this is also a glimpse of his potential as a divine entity. Sin is Man's failure, a revolt against his spirit. In his book, Sadhana Tagore writes," It is our desires that limit the scope of our self-realization, hinder our extension of consciousness and give rise to sin, which is the innermost barrier that keeps us apart from our God." (*Sadhana* p 112) Thus, sin and evil are the nature of our superficial self. Although Man is inclined to sin in his external nature, his inner nature always strives to overcome these tendencies. According to Tagore, this urge within Man is dominating him, which he must wage war against, namely, his narrow self.

In his book '*Religion of Man*.' Tagore says, "We know that in himself some meaning has yet to be realized, we do not feel the wonder of it, because it seems so natural to us that barbarism in Man is not absolute, that its limits are like limits of the horizon. The call is deep in his mind - the call of his eternal truth, which is beyond his direct knowledge and analytical logic. Moreover, individuals are born who do not doubt the truths of this transcendental Man." (*Religion of Man*, p 59) Thus, a Man, according to Tagore, is potentially Good.

This reflects the impact of Upanishadic Philosophy on Tagore's life. Man's nature is buried under his projected arrogant self, and when this projection is dispelled, Man reveals his true nature. Tagore, in this context, says, "But the most important fact that has come into our prominence along with the change of direction in our evolution, is the possession of a Spirit which has its enormous capital with a Surplus for more than the requirements of the biological animal in Man. Some overwhelming influence led us beyond the strict boundaries of living and offered us an open space where Man's thoughts and dreams could have their holidays." (*R.N Tagore, Religion of Man, pg 28*)

3. Man and the Divine Unity

In Tagore's philosophy, Man is an embodiment of the divine. His works—especially *The Religion of Man* (Tagore, 1931)—stress that the human soul reflects the Universal Spirit (Brahman). Man is not an isolated entity but deeply connected to nature, other beings, and the cosmos.



Tagore upholds a philosophy in which a person's dignity lies in their spiritual nature. The purpose of a man's life is to realize the Divinity that surrounds and within him. In this context, he propagated a Humanistic spirituality rooted in harmony, creativity, and the essential unity of all existence. Deity is not external or remote but immanent within the human soul. Thus, he propagated a deeply humanistic spirituality. For him, God is not located in Temples, scriptures, or rituals but in human souls. Central to his vision are two core ideas: Divinity is inherent in Humanity, and the unity of all existence. He writes, "Divinity in man is the true source of religion." (*Religion of Man, 1931, p. 25*)

He states that spiritual impulse arises from within, as an inner light of truth.

"The infinite in man is not a fiction; it is the eternal in him" (Tagore, *Religion Of Man*, .1931, p. 44). According to Tagore, the Divinity is inherent in Man as an infinite being. Man's infinity is expressed when he can surpass his lower self, his instinctive behaviour, and his animal instinct.

4. Creative Freedom and Inner Development

Tagore does not deny human freedom; instead, he envisions it as a creative unfolding toward truth, beauty, and love. Man achieves his true self not in rebellion against the world but through harmony with it. His educational philosophy at Santiniketan reflects this Idea—freedom must be cultivated, not imposed. As Man is free, his freedom is expressed in his creative acts, where he becomes a partner of the supreme soul. Man's true nature is not revealed in his acts of necessity, but in the acts which he does joyfully. Tagore says in ('Creative Unity p. 23)" Human society is for the best expression according to its perfection, leading it to the full realisation of the Divine in Humanity." Man's surplus emotional energy finds its outlet in the creation of art, as the emotional energy of God is expressed in His creation of the world. Therefore, he also becomes divine when he creates his heaven, where his ideas take form, imagination is given shape, and Personality is shaped.

Man is not content with the world that has been given to him. Therefore, he creates his world. However, that is only a pure work of art, created from Man's overflowing joy and inner urges of creation. Moreover, what Man expresses is the Universal Man - the ideal which he has in his mind of the perfect Man. "They open the windows of our mind to the eternal reality of man" (*R.N.Tagore, Religion of Man, .1931, p 152*).

Thus, this creative Personality of Man shows that in him, the life of an animal has taken a further turn. An animal is bound to the law of natural selection., and therefore it only expresses that which is attributed to it by God; in return, it cannot give anything. However, in humans, the receptive stage has given way to the stage when they have to 'give'. He takes his seat as Creator. Man gives to God offerings of his songs, art, and literature, to whom the ultimate meaning of all his creative works is directed. Tagore says, "God stands himself at his door and asks for his offerings." (*ibid*)

These ideas also reveal Tagore's vision of freedom. As Man is free, his freedom is expressed in his actions. He is not active on compulsion. Those actions that he must undertake to satisfy his material needs do not reveal his true nature. A civilization progresses because a man engages himself in activities that are not done under compulsion. Man does ot rest content with only doing such works that nature has prescribed him to do along with birds and beasts. His free acts are those which are not for use but for his ultimate expression. Tagore says, "The individual man must exist for Man the great and express him in disinterested works in science and philosophy." (*R.N. Tagore. Religion of Man 1931, p 17*)

5. Universality in Man

Man is not only an individual, but he is also a universal being. Man has an ideal of perfection. The Idea of the perfect Man is present in every human being, and here he embodies universality within himself. His ideals and values unite him with all other men. A man feels that he is not competing with himself, but where he is one with this perfect Man or the Universal Man, he is complete. Tagore says about Man, "He has observed deeper endeavour of his own heart and felt that he is not exclusively an individual, he is also one in spirit with the Universal Man, under whose inspiration the individual engages in expressing his ultimate truth crossing nature's limitations" (R. N. Tagore . Religion of Man . 1931 p 3)

Thus, this universality of Man raises him above the laws of nature. At this level, where Man is universal, there is no difference between Man and Man. The differences in social, educational, economic, and political conditions cannot



differentiate the inherent unity of all Men. The unity of all men is grounded in the universality of him. Man is part of the entire universe. He cannot be true unless he discovers this flow of universality that is common to all and by which he is related to the world's flow. Tagore says"...... A man's individuality is not his highest truth; there is that in him which is universal. If he were made to live in a world where his self was the only factor to consider, then that would be the worst prison imaginable to him, for Man's most profound joy is in growing and greater by more and more union with the all." (*R. N. Tagore, Sadhana, p 50*)

It is painful for a Man if he cannot express his individuality in his work. Moreover, it is equally painful for him if he remains only as a separate individual and is never united with the universe. When a Person realizes their unity with all, they become free from all suffering and pain.

A Man feels this unity through his sense of unity with God. Man is the expression of God, and he represents the creative spirit. The Creator has revealed Himself not only in human beings but also through the entire creation. Therefore, Man gets a glimpse of God in all objects of nature and every Being; through union with the universe, he becomes united with God. In Religion of Man Tagore says "Man as a creation, represents the creator, and this is why of all creatures it has been possible for him to comprehend this world in his knowledge and in his feeling and in his imagination, to realise in his imagination, to realize his spirit a union with spirit that is everywhere." (*R. N. Tagore* . *The Religion of Man* . 1931, p 17)

The universality of Humanity has taken two forms. At one place, Man realizes his unity with the flow of Humanity, and at another, he feels himself to be a part of the whole universe through the feeling of unity with the world's flow. Thus, according to Tagore, as an individual, though every human being is different from others, he, being part of the flow of Humanity, is united with all.

6. Universal Humanism - The Unity of Mankind

Tagore's Concept of Man is ethically grounded. Man is not merely free but responsible, not because of the social contract but because of the inner realization of oneness with all. Tagore's concept of Man logically leads to his Philosophy of Humanism. Tagore's vision of Humanism is based on the philosophy that every human being has the divine potentiality inherent in them, which enables them to cultivate a life of harmony, freedom, and compassion. His Idea is that of spiritual freedom, grounded in creative love and reverence for life. Thus, at the heart of Tagore's Humanism lies the belief in the oneness of Humanity. He rejected narrow Nationalism and sectarianism, advocating instead for a "universal humanism" which transcended borders, race, and religion. In his words: "The world today is more than ever in need of that one religion which will be based not on dogma or authority, but on personal realization." (*R.N. Tagore, Religion Of Man, 1931, p 42*)

This personal realization, according to Tagore, comes from an inner spiritual awakening that allows the Individual to perceive the divine in all beings. He envisioned a global fellowship (often using the term Visva-Bharati, meaning the communion of the world) where individuals would grow through cultural exchange and mutual respect. Thus, Tagore's Humanism is spiritual but not religious in a sectarian sense. He believed that God resides in Humanity, especially in ordinary people. This belief is beautifully reflected in his poem from Gitanjali:

"He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground

Moreover, where the pathmaker is breaking stones." (R. N Tagore, Gitanjali, 1912. Song Offering, poem 11)

His Humanism affirms that true worship lies in serving Humanity by recognizing and honoring the divine spark within each person. For Tagore, Man is a seeker of truth, beauty, and love, capable of reaching the highest through inner growth.

Tagore believed that education is the key to nurturing human potential. He established institutions like Santiniketan to promote an education system that encouraged freedom, creativity, harmony with nature, and an appreciation of multiple cultures. He rejected rote learning and advocated for a model where the child's inner self could blossom freely. Tagore's Philosophy of education is deeply Humanistic.



In works like *Nationalism* (1917), Tagore criticizes aggressive Nationalism, which he believed destroys the spiritual unity of Humanity. While he loved his country deeply, he was wary of Nationalism that promotes hatred and division. He wrote: "I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live." (*R.N.Tagore, Nationalism, Lecture: 'Nationalism in the West'*). Tagore, like all other Patriots of his time, wanted India to be free from alien rules. However, at the same time, he was aware that political freedom alone cannot be our objective. To him, the freedom movement meant a struggle against both the British administration and prejudices—moreover, the superstition of people who are barred from the absolute freedom of their Personality. He therefore says, "Swaraj is not our objective, Our fight is a spiritual fight - it is for Man . We are to emancipate Man from the meshes." (*Andrews, C.F.(Ed) Letters to a Friend, p 128*)

In the following section, we will briefly examine J.P. Sartre's Concept of the Human Being and his relationship with society.

7. Sartre's Concept of Man

"Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (J.P. P.Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 22).

Sartre is one of the strongest philosophers of the 20th century. He is known for his philosophy, "Existential Humanism..." At its core, Sartre's philosophy revolves around the freedom and the responsibilities of the human, alongside the making of purpose in an indifferent universe. Unlike older Humanism, which pigeon-holed Man in a set, moral or religious context, Sartre's existential Humanism proclaims that he is nothing more than what he makes himself to be.

In his renowned lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" from 1946, Sartre said: "Existence precedes essence." What that means is that human beings come into existence without a purpose and later define themselves by the actions they choose. No pre-given' human nature' exists, whether from God or biology. Instead, every person crafts their essence, identity, values, and purposes with conscious choices through radical freedom.

This perspective gives power to the Individual, but it also places a heavy burden of Responsibility on them. Lacking a guiding moral structure from a higher power means that people have to bear total Responsibility for their existence. As Sartre underlines, in the exercise of choice, one also chooses for all Humanity because every act contributes to a shared idea of what it means to be human, Sartre's Existentialism. Humanism offers a liberating yet demanding view of human nature. It sees Man as a creator of himself, who must live authentically, accept the weight of freedom, and act with Responsibility in a world without guaranteed meanings or values. In doing so, Sartre redefines Humanism—not as faith in a divine or rational order, but as faith in human freedom and the power to choose.

Another important aspect of Sartre's philosophy is radical freedom and Responsibility. Sartre emphasizes absolute freedom, but this freedom often proves to be a burden. With no divine plan or cosmic order, Man is "condemned to be free" and must accept the full weight of his choices and their consequences.

8. Alienation and Authenticity

Sartre portrays Man as alienated in a meaningless universe, in contrast to Tagore's Idea of unity. However, when Man embraces challenges and lives by values he has created for himself, authentic existence arises. These two concepts form the core of his existential project, in which he aimed to investigate what it means to be genuinely human in a meaningless world. According to Sartre, Man is destined for freedom, which carries with it the risk of alienation from oneself and other people as well as the possibility of true self-realization.

In Sartre's Existentialism, the Individual's inability to live by their freedom is the primary cause of alienation, rather than economic systems as in Marxist theory. According to Sartre, humans are "beings-for-themselves" (être-pour-soi)—conscious, self-aware entities who constantly define themselves through choices. However, this freedom is often terrifying. Instead of embracing it, people frequently flee from it into a state Sartre calls "bad faith" (mauvaise foi).

In bad faith, people deceive themselves by denying their autonomy and Responsibility by playing roles, following norms, or living up to social expectations. A server who performs with excessive precision and overidentifies with their



role, for instance, could be perceived as reducing themselves to a mere object (être-en-soi) and denying the complex freedom that exists outside of that role. By doing this, he distances himself from his true self and hides behind an identity that is simpler and safer than freedom.

According to Sartre's explanation in Being and Nothingness, alienation also occurs in our interactions with other people. We become conscious of ourselves as objects in other people's eyes when they gaze at us. This "Look" (le regard) deprives us of our individuality and fuels sentiments of estrangement. We begin to perform for others, adopting false selves to fit external expectations. Thus, Sartre presents a world where alienation is not merely social or economic, but existential: a disconnection from one's freedom, from others, and one's potential.

Against this backdrop of alienation, Sartre proposes the ideal of authenticity. To live authentically is to acknowledge and accept one's freedom and Responsibility fully. It is to act not out of habit, fear, or social pressure, but from one's own conscious, deliberate choice.

Authenticity is not a fixed state or moral code but an ongoing effort to live truthfully with oneself. It involves recognizing that there are no external justifications—no divine commands, no predetermined essence, no "human nature"—to guide our actions. The authentic Individual, therefore, creates values through action and takes full Responsibility for them.

However, this can lead to anguish, as Sartre points out, because the authentic person realizes that in choosing for themselves, they are also defining what it means to be human. However, this anguish is not paralyzing—it is the price of freedom. Sartre writes:

"Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." (J.P.Sartre. Existentialism is Humanism. p 22)

To be authentic, then, is to own one's freedom courageously, even in the face of uncertainty and the absurdity of existence.

Authenticity, for Sartre, is not a retreat into the self; it is a commitment to the world. An authentic life demands Engagement, or what Sartre later called engagement politique—the involvement of the self in shaping the world. As free beings living among others, our choices have a profound impact on the collective human project. This way, authenticity becomes an ethical and even political ideal. The authentic person not only seeks truth within but also seeks to act in solidarity with others, respecting their freedom and Humanity.

9. Conclusion

The question of what it means to be human—what constitutes the nature, purpose, and dignity of Man—has preoccupied philosophers, poets, and thinkers across cultures and centuries. In this context, as we have studied Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet-philosopher, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, they offer profound yet sharply contrasting visions of the "idea of man." While Tagore roots human identity in the spiritual unity of existence and emphasizes harmony with the divine and the universe, Sartre locates Man in a godless universe, condemned to create himself through radical freedom. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of Tagore's and Sartre's conceptions of Humanity, exploring their metaphysical assumptions, ethical implications, and visions of human potential.

Tagore's Idea of Man: A Spiritual Humanism. Rabindranath Tagore's Concept of the Human Being is deeply intertwined with his spiritual Humanism, where the Individual is seen not as a fixed entity but as a being on a journey toward truth, beauty, and universal love. For Tagore, Man is essentially a spiritual being, endowed with a divine spark that unites him with all of creation.

Man as a Microcosm of the Universe. This view reflects a Vedantic metaphysics, where the Atman (the individual self) is inherently connected to the Brahman (the universal spirit). Man's destiny, therefore, is not to dominate the world but to realize this inner unity and live in harmony with others and nature. Another important feature of Tagore's Philosophy is 'Man and the Divine Within'. This reflects his belief in the Divinity within Man, mainly the commoner. For Tagore, the ethical and spiritual life consists in recognizing this inner Divinity and living a life of compassion, freedom, and love. Tagore's vision of Man is not merely individualistic. He emphasizes human growth through relationships, primarily facilitated by education and culture. He critiques mechanical education and advocates for a system that enables the child



to "blossom freely" in both nature and society. Thus, for Tagore, the essence of Man lies in his spiritual evolution, which is realized through creativity, self-realization, and service to others.

Sartre's Idea of Man, in sharp contrast, arises from a starkly atheistic and existentialist framework. Sartre rejects all notions of a divine origin or predetermined essence. This means that Man is not born with a purpose or essence, but must define himself through his actions. Sartre's conception of Man is grounded in freedom, choice, and Responsibility—but also in anguish and alienation. Sartre's Man is fundamentally a being-for-itself (être-pour-soi)—a conscious being who is always in the process of becoming. This implies that human nature is not given but constructed, and every individual bears the full burden of Responsibility for who they become. Sartre famously claims that Man is "condemned to be free." Freedom is inescapable, but so is the anxiety it causes. It leads many people to fall into bad faith (mauvaise foi)—a self-deception in which individuals pretend they are not free to avoid the burden of Responsibility. This Individual denies his freedom and reduces himself to an object (être-en-soi), becoming alienated from his authentic self.

Thus, Sartre's Idea of Man is both individualistic and universal. Though there is no God, Man becomes the Creator of values, and his life is meaningful only insofar as he actively engages with his freedom.

Although emerging from vastly different metaphysical and cultural backgrounds, both Tagore and Sartre share a profound concern for the human condition, and both reject deterministic models of Humanity.

Both thinkers emphasize that Man must not be passive. Tagore sees Man as an active seeker of spiritual truth; Sartre sees Man as the Creator of his meaning. For both, life is not something to be endured, but to be shaped.

Tagore critiques social structures, especially colonial education and Nationalism, that suppress individuality. Sartre similarly critiques societal roles that reduce individuals to objects. The advocate for an authentic life based on inner realization (Tagore) or radical freedom (Sartre)

Despite these parallels, their visions of Man differ in foundation, tone, and ultimate goal. Rabindranath Tagore and Jean-Paul Sartre offer two profoundly different yet equally compelling visions of Humanity. Tagore envisions Man as a spiritual being whose purpose is to discover and live in communion with the divine and the universe. Sartre, by contrast, sees Man as a radically free being in a godless world, burdened with the task of creating his essence through action.

Tagore calls for a life of harmony, beauty, and shared Humanity, while Sartre demands a life of authentic Engagement, moral courage, and existential Responsibility. Both insist that Man must not abdicate his role in shaping his destiny. Whether one finds greater truth in Tagore's faith in the divine within or in Sartre's call for freedom in the face of Nothingness, both thinkers affirm the dignity and potential of Man, not as a static entity, but as a becoming, a project, a pilgrimage toward truth. Both center their Philosophy on the belief that a Man has an immense capacity to engage in rational deliberations, which differentiates him from other Biological beings, and with that power, he has the freedom to structure his Being and existence.

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