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The influence of Vaishnavism on Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali

A great literature seems to have almost invariably a great name attached to it, one name by which it is known and recognized as great. It is the name of the man who releases the innermost power of that literature, and who makes at the same time the height to which its creative genius has attained or perhaps can ever attain. Homer and Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare, Goethe and Camoens, Firdausi in Persian and Kalidasa in classical Sanskrit, are such names- each being the presiding deity, the godhead born full armed out of the poetic consciousness of the race to which he belongs.

Such a great name is Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali Literature. One can say that he is the supreme liberator and fosterer- savita and pusha- of Bengali literature. He lifted that language and literature from what had a narrow outlook into the domain of the international and universal. Through him a thing of local value was turned most accurately into a thing of world value. He was truly called Gurudev as he reflected and exemplified the best of India's spiritual and culture heritage. His Gitanjali is a communion of a finite with the Infinite. It truly reflects the spirit, the inner soul of Indian culture. This particular characteristic of his poems made Indians endearingly call him their Gurudev, the Preceptor.

Born in a distinguished Brahmo family of Bengal on May 7, 1861 at Jorasanko in Calcutta, Tagore is that Indian poet who has carved for modern India a lasting place on the literary globe. His illustrious family was well known for its interest in and patronage of music, art, poetry and culture. Tagore inherited the rich legacy. As a result, what he expressed, in all his creations, is one aspect or another, a rhythm or a note of the soul movement.

It was during the sixteenth century that the seedlings of Bengali literature sprouted and spread. The impact of Vaishnava philosophy on Bengali literature is well known to the reader of the history of Indian literature. Bengali literature flourished mainly due to the deeply devotional lyrics written by the Vaishnava monks centring round the life and philosophy of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the renowned Vaishnava saint, who India and particularly Bengal accepted as the incarnation of the united pair - Radha and Krishna.

As a fact, modern Bengali literature is what it has been largely because of the Vaishnava lyricists. No modern Bengali literature could be left uninfluenced by the emotions and feelings expressed by Jaideva, Vidhyapati and Chandidas. The philosophy of the entire movement of these Vaishnava poets can be summed up in just one word- love.

When Rabindranath loomed on the literary scene he appeared not as a reformist or patriotic poet. His debut was as a Vaishnava lyricist. He had read these Vaishnava Padavalis as they were commonly known. Prachin Kavya Samgraha was then a popular journal. Rabindranath was a regular reader of the journal and through this he had his first introduction to the Vaishnava poets. It seems his favorite poets were Vidhyapati, Chandidas, Jayadeva and Govindadas. "I found in the Vaishnava poets lyrical movement; and images startling and new"- he commented. What fascinated the poet from his childhood was the music, the symbolism, the intense spiritual yearning, the interpenetration of human feelings with the beauties of nature of the Vaishnava literature. According to the great scholar and author Annada Sankar Ray, "After Kalidasa, Vidyapati seems to have most influenced Rabindranath Tagore."

The publication of the English version of Tagore's Gitanjali took place in 1913, and at once made Tagore a great world- poet and won for him the prestigious 'Nobel Prize' for literature. Gitanjali means song offerings and as Dr. Radhakrishnan remarked in his Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, "The poems of 'the Gitanjali' are offerings of the finite to the Infinite." In the words of T. S. Eliot, it is

great poetry which, "expresses in perfect language permanent human impulses", and thus brings strange consolation to the human heart. It is this that he has made living and vibrant, raised almost to the highest philosophy of the world. Gitanjali is a cry of the soul, a profound experience in the inner heart that wells out in the multifarious cadences of its verses.

In Gitanjali Tagore has brought out the very soul of poetry- its soul of lyric fervour and grace, of intuitive radiance and enlightened emotions, of beauty and harmony and delicacy. Tagore shows us in verses full of beauty and spiritual passion what raptures and powers come to us when we receive God's grace, the attainment of which is the crown and glory of life. And through the love of God we attain the love of all, because the two loves are inseparable. The poet says:

*THOU hast made me known to friend whom I knew not...
...When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut.(Poem LXIII)*

The search for the unity through the gates of love and wisdom is the only true joy and duty of each human soul. It is then that the soul rises on the wings of its surrendered will to that close union with God wherein it becomes divine itself. The poet asks in exultant rapture:

*WHAT divine drink wouldst thou have, my God, from this overflowing cup of life?...
...Thy world is weaving words in my mind and thy joy is adding music to them. Thou givest thyself
to me in love and then feelest thine own sweetness in me. (Poem LXV)*

Looking at the cosmic scheme of things from this lofty and divine standpoint, Tagore is able to perceive and communicate profound spiritual truths and to see and make us see the divine significance of life in its myriad incidents. Tagore sees God as not only the lover the King of our souls, but as our friend and brother also. He is to be reached by loving our human brothers. The poet says:

*In pleasure and pain I stand not by the side of men, and thus stand by thee. I shrink to give up my
life, and thus do not plunge into the great waters of life.(Poem LXXVII)*

In the Vaishnava philosophy liberation comes from attachment. Attachment is the means rather than an obstacle in the path of liberation. The Vaishnava followers worship their Lord in the form of the lover so that they could gain access to the sacred, the infinite and external. Liberation comes through loving, desiring Krishna with no interest in liberation. Liberation is not the goal of love but its byproduct. Actual union is avoided because if the devotee is liberated there will be no Bhakti, no love and love is higher than liberation. It is in dualism that love can be active. Rabindranath too negates that liberation which will separate the devotee from the Divine.

*Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him
the bonds of creation: he is bound with us all forever.(Poem XI)*

LEELA or PLAY was considered the 'creative' and 'recreative' activity of the Lord by the Vaishnava poets. The act of generation, operation, destruction and then regeneration is God's play and the world is His playground. The devotees are to sing and meditate on this 'leela'. In Gitanjali Rabindranath expresses the same idea of the world as God's playground:

In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play. (Poem XCVI)

From these instances, we can say that there is a remarkable influence of Vaishnavism on Gitanjali. In a brilliant analysis of the Poetry of Tagore, Sri Aurobindo observed, "One of the most remarkable peculiarities of Rabindranath's genius is the happiness and originality with which he has the whole spirit of Vaishnava poetry and turned it into something essentially the same and yet new and modern. He had given the old sweet spirit of emotional and passionate religion an expression of more delicate and complex richness, a voice full of subtler and more penetratingly spiritual shades of feeling than the deep-hearted but simple early age, Bengal could know." Indeed, Rabindranath Tagore will always be remembered as the very soul of Indian culture and the living voice of India, equally dear to India and abroad as well.

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