

# RABINDRANATH TAGORE: POET AND PHILOSOPHER

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ON the 7th of August, Rabindranath Tagore died at the age of eighty. Modern India boasts of many men of international fame. But above all towered the calm, composed and stately figure of Rabindranath Tagore, with his flowing white beard, serene face, and eyes out of which eternity greeted the world. With nations at each other's throats and humanity nervously listening to the raucous voice of Krupp's artillery, few care for the poet. Yet a lyric of love is far more important than a hymn of hate, and a poet is the greatest gift of God to man.

Tagore was a versatile genius. He was a poet, philosopher, dramatist, novelist, short-story writer, educationist, editor, composer, painter, actor and dancer. But above all he was a lusty singer of songs that move a nation's heart. He brought the rich heritage of ancient India to the door of modern youth and, gracefully spanning the gulf between the East and the West, he stood for a cultural synthesis between the two. His influence was as gentle as the falling of the dew; his appeal as persuasive as the spirit of the spring.

Rabindranath was born in Calcutta on May 6, 1861, in a family of artists and philosophers. Like Goethe, he hated school; it was a stifling prison house, a ghastly hospital. But the lonely sensitive child was passionately fond of Nature, his loving companion throughout life. As a tiny hopeful, he sat at the window now watching with wonder the shadow of the banyan tree wriggle over the disturbed surface of the pond, now exulting at the sight of white clouds sailing against the blue sky like Spanish galleons. His unbearable school days in India over, he was sent to London to study for the bar. This, too, was uninspiring, and he returned home within a year at the age of eighteen.

If Tagore learned little at school, he learned much from life and enriched the lives of millions. He sang of life's lilting joys and poignant sorrows, its deep longings and passionate strife. He revealed to us many a secret that mocks our minds, and grateful humanity has showered many honours upon him. He travelled and lectured in many lands, directing men to the realization of a great vision. In 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He gave the whole sum to his

Visvabharati (international college) at Bolpur, Bengal. It is conducted on the principle of international fellowship, and aims to build a synthesis between the culture of the East and that of the West. He used royalties from his works, lecture fees and donations to finance this unique international institution.

Tagore was knighted in 1915, but he returned his title in 1919 as a protest against the post-war atrocities in the Punjab. In August, 1940, Oxford University conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Literature. Fêted throughout the world as a great celebrity, he, like the sages of ancient India, continued to live a simple life in the rustic atmosphere of Shantinekatan (The Abode of Peace). In this chaotic war-torn world he held aloft the torch of love and internationalism, lest the light within us grow dim as we fight against the darkness around.

His most important works available in English are: *Gitanjali*, *The Crescent Moon*, *The Gardener*, *Fruit-Gathering*, *The Post Office*, *Stray Birds*, *The Fugitive and Other Poems*, *Sacrifice and Other Plays*, *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, *Sakuntala*, *Red Oleander*, *Sadhana*, *Lectures on Personality*, *Nationalism*, *My Reminiscences*.

Tagore was a great poet of nature, depicting all her moods. He sang of the freshness of the dawn awakening life from its lair; the midday hush with green leaves glistening in the sun; the reflective calm of twilight's breath when many a ghost of dead yesterday meets us in the dusk of memory; and the dark silence of the night that muffles life's ugliness and pain. He sang of the eternal caravan of the stars proceeding across the pathless sky, and of the night that labors in obscurity to enrich the hour of waking with a wealth of color and beauty. A new day breaks and with the poet we look at life again, rejoice in its love and laughter, share its song and sorrow, and feel its beauty so fleetingly fashioned. We wonder whether Heaven itself could offer more.

What lavish gifts are daily bestowed upon the world! Let us enjoy it, pleaded Tagore, and save God's face for indulging in such extravagance. But Nature to him was more than a fairy goddess who came to his window with trays of bright toys. With mute eloquence, she spoke of the Great Beyond. The joyous note of a bird and the smiling nod of a flower were Books of Revelation, and every atom of dust contained prophecies of the Unknown. The frail blades of grass and the mighty mountains ached with a meaning too deep for words. Every tree was a silent prayer; every garland a hymn of praise. Every stream

was sacred; every hilltop a shrine, and God dwelt in every grove. The universe was the Infinite lying stretched in space; to the seer it was an open sesame, and everywhere there was a gateway to Heaven. Every morning Nature came to the poet with closed hand and laughingly asked, "What have I got?" and nothing seemed impossible. Every new day was like a new-born child, yet to be named, concealing its secrets from the eager world. "The same stream of life," writes Tagore in *Gitanjali*, "that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures." The song of the soul blends with music of the spheres in the universal harmony. To separate man from Nature, therefore, is to separate the bud from the blossom, and to put their grace to the credit of two different principles.

Not only man is one with Nature, but God is one with man and the meeting point of God and man is Love. Love, indeed, is life in its fullness. It is the highest moral ideal of man; it is the very essence of the Godhead. In *The Gardener*, Tagore sings of youthful love that is content to snatch a fleeting moment, rejoice with gay abandonment and linger fondly over tender tokens in painful loneliness. In the more mature and philosophical songs of the *Gitanjali*, love, having known all passionate rapture and despair, transcends life and yearns to attain the joy eternal in oneness with the Infinite.

Love, to the poet, was greater than knowledge which, devoid of love, may lead to icy coldness. For the relation of mere intellect to the world is partial, but that of love is complete. Love is forgetful of the self, and knows the object of its adoration by unity with it. In love alone the gifts are added to the gains, and the credit and debit columns are on the same side of the ledger. Here alone all sense of difference is obliterated, and the human soul can reach across the threshold of the Infinite. "Let the dead have the immortality of fame," writes the poet, "the living need the immortality of love."

Tagore was considered a great poet of sorrow; he was also a great poet of joy. For in Tagorean philosophy joy is simply sorrow unmasked. The two are opposite poles of the same battery. They are the rain and the sunshine that every traveller must meet on the road of life. To separate them is impossible, for the very things that give us joy by their presence leave a legacy of sorrow by their absence, and the very source of laughter is filled with tears. No wonder Tagore sings not only of the "joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the

grass," but also of the joy that "sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world", "the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust and knows not a word."

Tagore was the fondest idolator of the small child, and portrayed his fanciful world with delicate tenderness in *The Crescent Moon*. We enter the child world with wistful longing to play with empty shells on the seashore, build houses of sand and gather pebbles to scatter them again. Is it so different from the world of man? We enter a realm of wonder and enchantment, make believe and innocence. For a moment we find ourselves floating paper boats, playing the hero and hating the wicked postman for not bringing a letter. We wonder whether the watchman with his lantern and persistent shadow ever goes to bed in his life. *The Crescent Moon* portrays the deep abiding love of the mother and the amiable vagaries of the child with exquisite beauty.

Tagore is closer to the English poets of the early 19th century than to those of any other period. It was a century dominated by German transcendentalism, influenced in turn by the thought of ancient India. Wordsworth's "Child is the father of the man" was a poetic echo of Hegelian paradoxes. It was a period of the spontaneous outpouring of the heart, a period that deified spiritual instinct. The poems of Tagore recall the imaginative loftiness of Shelley, the lyrical splendor of Blake and the sensuous quality of word and phrase in Keats.

To understand Tagore is to comprehend the soul of India. He represents the Indian ideal of religion, art and philosophy. His poetry is at all times suggestive, and its indefiniteness mocks the precision of prose. Add to that the abundance of allegory, similes and paradoxes, and the difficulty of interpreting Tagore is obvious.

Poetry, like all art, he believed, is born in the flood-tide of our personality. To him its origin is in the region of the superfluous, and the tongue speaketh out of the fullness of the heart. "The road of excess," says Blake, "leads to the palace of wisdom," and "affluence" gave birth to the poetry of Browning. Art, to Tagore, is neither didactic nor objective; it reveals the inner self of the artist rather than its object, and aims only to delight and to please. It snatches things from the fleeting

flux of time, and views them under the light that never was on sea or land.

Art for this Hindu thinker is thus not imitative, as certain Greek analysts maintained. It is a vision and a creation. It is a picture, not a photograph. Like philosophy and religion it deals with the perfect expression of the one through the harmony of the many. Mere succession of notes does not make music, nor a collection of petals a rose. Mere rhyme is not a lyric, nor mere sentiment a song. If there is no creative unity comprehending the diversity of detail, we have no art. Material, as such, is savage; only the magic touch of creative unity, restoring perfect relationship between parts, makes a thing of beauty. It is the harmony of facts, therefore, rather than their number, that constitutes truth in art.

For philosophic inspiration Tagore went back to the Upanishad. He offered no reasoned metaphysics to the world, and revealed himself more in his poems than in anything else. Even *Sadhana* (*The Realization of Life*) is not a systematic exposition of his philosophy; it is more like the desultory musings of a sage. Tagore, indeed, was as much a philosopher as a poet can be. But there is no opposition between poetry and philosophy. Philosophy is a search for truth, while poetry is an expression of beauty, and Keats confirms that beauty is truth, truth beauty. Both poetry and philosophy are creative reconstructions of experience.

Human consciousness is the generating mother of all philosophies, and Tagore inevitably begins with it. Man, to him, is both finite and infinite; he is earth's child and heaven's heir. On the one hand, he must obey the laws of necessity and strive in the world around him; on the other, he is a free member of the spiritual realm. Both of these are necessary, for the root is as important to the plant as the flower. If it did not cling to the earth and struggle for the satisfaction of its needs, it would accumulate no treasure of fragrance and beauty to enrich the world.

In Tagore's philosophy the finite and the infinite are inseparable. Mere finite is like a lamp without light, and mere infinite a meaningless abstraction. God is related to the world as a singer to the song; the world is made not only *by* Him, but *of* Him. But if the world perishes, He does not die with it any more than the singer ceases with his song. Between man and God there is no impassable barrier, for man can be as perfect as the Father who is in Heaven. And to believe that there can be

no salvation without divine grace is to believe that a seed can never sprout without a miracle. Yet such miracles are miraculous only by their reckless profusion. If Tagore was a mystic, he kept his feet firmly on the ground. To him the natural was the supernatural and there was "no mystery beyond the present; no striving for the impossible; no shadow behind the charm; no groping in the depth of the dark." The world around was neither a figment of the imagination nor a snare of the devil. It was a playground where we build our souls. And we proceed not from sin to salvation at once; we strive from a lower truth to a higher truth; from a dimmer light to a brighter one.

Asepticism was not for the rich personality of the poet. He found no deliverance in renunciation, and felt the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight. Nor had he any patience with the Yogis who turned their back on the world and sought God in utter passivity. God was not to be found in the dingy corner of a temple thick with incense. He walks the highways of humanity in broad daylight, and rejoices in the eternal effort of man to extend his power over Nature. "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground, and where the path-maker is breaking stones;" the poet wanted us to greet Him in the peasant and the worker. Tagore looked at life steadily and saw it whole. It was for him neither an empty dream nor a meaningless blunder. It was a means to self-perfection, a way to spiritual progress. Mere velocity, therefore, was not to be taken for vitality, nor mere activity for action. All this may be feverish unrest, a ritual neither guided by wisdom nor inspired by love. To impel us ever onward, both intellect and emotion are necessary; they are the indispensable rudder and sail of our sea-faring vessels.

The poet maintained that struggle and sacrifice are writ large across the face of the earth. All progress is sacrifice, and life itself is an eternal process of birth and death. Every day an old dream dies and a new one is born. Here the seed tears its heart so that the plant may be born; the bud immolates itself for the flower, the flower for the fruit and the fruit for the seed. The universe itself is a sacrifice of the Supreme. Tagore believed that passivity borders on death, and that life is gained in the struggle with the living. In such a struggle fatalism is futile; it is merely an excuse of a soul without a will. Pessimism is sickly; it is the result of building theories when the mind is suffering. Fear is paralyzing, and weakness is the traitor that betrays our souls. Our Hindu poet was an apostle of strength

and enlightenment, faith and courage. Perfection to him was not a gift to be bestowed; it was a trophy to be won. Life to him was real only when it is creatively active, and God is best worshipped where man is creator. What mattered, therefore, was not what we possess and how much, but what we express and in what manner.

Life, according to this philosophy, is given to us, and we earn it by giving it. Accumulating material things in an endless fashion is a wearisome task, for man is not a mere money-bag always engaged in financial leap-frog. He is greater than his possessions. His abiding happiness lies in devoting himself to a noble ideal—love of country, humanity or God. Without responsibility and lacking moral depth, life is mere barbarism even if richly adorned. Without spiritual design it is incomplete. Its progress is not to be measured by the distance travelled without any reference to a goal. Its interminable straight lines are curbed into an organic whole only by a moral purpose. Life, indeed, is what we make it, for our desires, thoughts and actions determine what we are.

Tagore found much to admire in the West, and much to criticize. Her passion for freedom and social service, her scientific contribution and pragmatic outlook have enriched humanity. But her knowledge has not matured into wisdom, nor her greatness into goodness. Her scientific method ignores the art of life, and her self-government shows little government of the self. She is forever doing and never done. Her dominant note is not creative; she knows not the beauty of completion. India, on the other hand, considering the spiritual to be more real than the physical, longed for the isolation of a contemplative life. Obsessed with the Divine, she had paid little attention to the human. Her consuming passion for the eternal slightly ignored the riches of this life. As a result, she has paid dearly in the field of extension and power. Tagore wanted India neither to discard her ancient heritage and be a mendicant nor to dwarf herself by rejecting what others have to offer. If the East in ministering to the soul starved the body, the West in surfeiting the body stifled the soul. If the East refused to move, the West was moving rapidly, far beyond itself. Tagore believed that a synthesis between the two will lead to a culture unthinkably rich. He stood for a comprehensive outlook in which science and religion, logic and inspiration, restraint and freedom complement each other. A full life combines the bustle of activity with the calm of contemplation, and the joy of self-abandonment



with the pride of "creativity". Tagore used to insist that man in his fullness is not powerful but perfect. The ideal of power is exclusive; it cannot bear a rival. Fortunately, the mercy of death lies at its core. But the ideal of perfection is all embracing; its ending is in the Endless.

The poet abhorred the national mania for conquest, and nothing incited his fury more than the inhuman self-idolatry of the Nation. To him it was an offensive apparatus of power. It was a monster with an insatiable appetite and a crafty conspiring brain; it had the conscience of a ghost and the callous perfection of an automaton. It throve upon mutilated humanity, and preached the cult of collective selfishness as a moral duty. It kept its victims so thoroughly drugged by continual doses of self-laudation that they became morally insensible, and committed horrible crimes with Yahoo yells of exaltation.

Repelled by its tyranny and oppression, its rapine and destruction, Tagore did not want India to degenerate into such a monstrosity. He wished her to be a land

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.

What he wished for India, he wished also for the world.

Tagore was a prophet of peace not conflict, love not hate. He stood for a simple life and a pure heart, a clear spiritual vision and harmony with the universe. His words breathe, his ideas enlightened the mind, and his poetry moves the heart. His songs instil a new faith into the sinking heart of man; his philosophy provides a full garment for the whole of man's being. For the last half century Tagore endeavoured to create a world where "life may be beautiful like summer flowers and death like autumn leaves."