CHAPTER VI

MYSTICISM OF SUFFERING

Tagore, the joyous mystic, does not ignore the very conspicuous aspect of life, namely suffering. One of the specialities of Gitanjali is the singular, mystic way the poet approaches suffering. In effect in poem no. 40 he prays, "Send thy angry storm, dark with death, if it is thy wish, and with lashes of lightning startle the sky from end to end! (XL, 23). The suffering God sends is welcome to the poet. If like a father He punishes him with His terrible anger, He will, also, surely, bend upon him with His love and mercy afterwards, like a mother bending her tearful face over her child, after he has been punished by the father.

The simile is very telling and it beautifully illustrates the role of suffering in a mystic's life and also his approach to it. In Tagore's Gitanjali the mysticism of joy, is only one aspect of his life, one side of the coin. It has its other side as well -- the mysticism of suffering. Tagorean mysticism of
suffering has its uniqueness. Poem no. 52 presents it vividly and dramatically. The Divine lover visits the post-beloved during the night. They have a night of bliss. The Divine lover departs early in the morning. The beloved now searches for some gifts the Lover might have left behind for the poet. To his surprise he discovers that He has not left behind any flowers, spices or vase of perfumed flowers which as we have already seen in chapter 3, symbolise the comforts and luxuries of the world. The only gift the Divine Lover has left behind is His sword, which symbolises spiritual strength and courage, consequent on suffering. Tagore seems to suggest that Easter Sunday comes only after Good Friday. This sword enables the poet to fight the evil within his own self and attain soul-force.

Soul-force makes him fearless and enables him to keep his body pure, knowing that God's loving touch is upon all his limbs. It helps the poet to keep all untruths out of his thoughts, knowing that God is that truth which has kindled the light of reason in his mind.
Soul force also assists him to drive all evils away from his heart and keep his "love in flower", knowing that God has His seat in the inmost shrine of the poet's heart. Finally the poet is emboldened to endeavour to reveal God in all his actions, knowing it to be His power which gives him strength to act (IV, 3). No Indian poet has ever striven so hard to elaborate the various salutary functions suffering performs in the mystic's soul as the Tagore of Gitanjali.

The sword the Divine Lover left behind enables the poet to sever the bonds that bind him to the world. He is enabled to do his duty fearlessly, irrespective of what befalls him. Kabir also uses 'sword' symbolically in the same way. In poem no. 37 of The Hundred Poems he exhorts, "Lay hold on your sword, and join in the fight. Fight, O my brother, as long as life lasts."¹ And he affirms in the same poem, "It is in the kingdom of truth, contentment and purity, that this battle is raging, and the sword that rings forth most loudly is the sword of His name" (XXXVII, 47). And with this

¹ Kabir XXXVII, 47.
sword the devotee has to strike off his enemy's head, and there make an end of him quickly. The enemy here symbolises sin. The mystic has to overcome evil by making good use of the 'sword' i.e. suffering. The influence of Kabir on Tagore's Gitanjali is quite evident. Reference has already been made in chapter 3 to this kinship.

The sword in Gitanjali symbolises suffering and the spiritual strength and courage with which the poet can fight the evil within his soul — untruth, selfishness, and impurity. Spiritual strength makes the poet fearless and capable of resisting evil without caring for what happens to him. Suffering teaches Tagore the virtue of detachment taught by the Gita. It makes him indifferent to pleasure and pain, to comfort and luxury, to praise and blame of the world.

The divine sword is, in a sense, much more fascinating to the poet than the beauty of this world. He writes in poem no.53 "But more beautiful to me thou

2 Kabir XXXVII, 47.
sword with its curve of lightning like the outspread wings of the divine bird of Vishnu, perfectly poised in the angry red light of the sunset" (LIII, 35). The Tagore of Gitanjali thinks that just as the burning of gold makes the metal perfect, pure and bright, suffering leads men to spiritual perfection.

His religious insight especially in Gitanjali, like that of all great saints and mystics, was born of deeply experienced sorrow and solitude. All the pain and suffering, the bereavements and rebuffs, the struggles and mortifications which Tagore underwent in the first decade of this century, were finally resolved and sublimated in the songs of the Bengali Gitanjali.

The tenor is the same in the English version.

Mrinalini Devi, Tagore's wife, who had looked after him for twenty years, with unstinted love and devotion, and had borne him five children, died on 23 November, 1902. His feelings of sorrow and bereavement found expression in a fine elegy Smeran. It has twenty-seven poems, all remarkable for their tenderness, depth of feeling and simplicity of
utterance. One of these is included in the English version of *Gitanjali* (LXXXVII, 57-58). The poem presents the husband who looks absentmindedly for the wife everywhere in the house, only to realize that he will never again see her on this earth. As Kripalani writes in this connection, "... the husband's sincerity of sorrow at a loss that was irreplaceable and that was felt from day to day is very evident and is movingly expressed without an excess of self-pity." It is mysterically expressed too in as much the poet most willingly surrenders himself to God's holy will.

In September 1903, nine months after her mother's death, Renuka, Tagore's dear daughter, in spite of all her father's desperate attempts to save her life, died at the tender age of thirteen. The father felt her loss very deeply. Four months after the death of Renuka, the poet suffered another bereavement. A young and brilliant poet, Satis Roy whom Tagore loved as his own son and who, an idealist like himself, had

3 Kripalani 209.
joined his school staff at Santiniketan, suddenly died of small-pox.

The whole school had to be shifted to Shelidah for the time being, for fear of the epidemic. Financial difficulties made it increasingly difficult to run the school and Tagore was obliged to sell the royalty of a limited edition of his collected works. His father, the Maha Rishi passed away on 19th January, 1905, of course at the ripe old age of eighty-eight. The tragedy of November, 1907 was the greatest to Tagore. His youngest son, Samindra, a handsome and gifted boy suddenly died of cholera at the age of thirteen, on the same day on which his mother had died five years earlier.

With the untimely death of his youngest son Samindra, he was reduced to utter loneliness. Loneliness amid the crowd is even more oppressive and so, for a time he retired into solitude into his estate at Shelidah. Nevertheless, as Kripalani affirms: "He had learnt not to muddy the waters of his Muse with his personal grief, his verse was increasingly becoming
his offering to God, the language of his communication of a higher love."  

With the intention of recovering his health and to meet at first hand the live minds of the West Tagore decided to sail from Calcutta to London on 19th March, but on the night before his departure he was suddenly taken ill and the doctors forbade an immediate voyage. His luggage was on board and had to be sent back from Madras where the ship halted next. He was disappointed at this unforeseen cancellation of his voyage.

4 Kripalani 209.

5 His son's account of this ill-fated voyage is worth quoting: "The evening before the boat sailed, there was a party at Sir Ashutosh Chaudhuri's residence, where a performance of father's operatic play, Valmiki Pratibha, was given. . . . Father, of course, had to be present. We came back late at night. Instead of going to bed father sat down to write letters for the remainder of the night. In the early hours of the morning we found him, to our dismay, on the verge of a collapse. Doctors had to be hurriedly summoned. All our luggage had been sent on to the boat the previous evening. A big crowd of friends had gathered at the Chandpal Ghat jetty to see him off. Their surprise could well be imagined when the boat left with our belongings but the owners were not to be seen." [Ratindranath Tagore, On the Edges of Time (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1958) Qtd. in Kripalani 244].
voyage and sought consolation and strength, as in the past by retiring again to Sholidah on the banks of the
his beloved river, Padma. It was here that he began to translate, for the first time, some of his Gitanjali
songs into English. He has translated fifty-one of the hundred and fifty-seven poems of his Bengali Gitanjali.
To quote Kripalani again, "Tagore's religious poetry which culminated in the passionate sincerity and utter
simplicity of Gitanjali was wrung out of his heart's blood." 6

Tagore succeeded in getting a positive meaning out of the sufferings of life. He asserts in Creative
Unity, "Life's tragedies occur, not to demonstrate their own reality, but to reveal that eternal principle
of joy in life, to which they gave a rude shaking." 7
Suffering is not incompatible with joy; rather joy is enhanced by it. Occasionally Tagore accepts the
ideas that suffering and pain are necessary to make us

6 Kripalani 209-10.
7 Creative Unity 5.
conscious of the existence of joy, as the shades are needed to exhibit the figures in a picture, or in another simile, as, "there must come a full pause to weave perfection into music."8 "The meaning of health comes home to us with painful force when disease disturbs it."9 He affirms quite in a mystic vein, "Life droops toward its sunset to be drowned in the golden shadows."10

The Tagore of Gitanjali has discovered the deeper aspects of the sufferings of life. They are means to perfection. Pain "is the hard coin which must be paid for everything valuable in this life, for our power, our wisdom, our love."11 It is the birth-pang of joy. The flower, in order to bring forth fruit, has to shed its exquisite petals and a cruel economy compels it to give up its sweet perfume.12 Viewed in this way, pain, as has already been hinted, is only "the other
side of joy." "In pain is symbolised the infinite possibility of perfection, the eternal unfolding of joy."\(^{13}\)

According to Tagore, the most important lesson that we can learn from our life, therefore, is not that there is pain in this world, but that it depends upon ourselves to turn it into good account, "that it is possible to transmute it into joy."\(^{14}\)

A really religious aspect of the sufferings of life is reached when Tagore sees it as a means in the hands of God for the fostering of a spiritual character in him. There are many different desires in his heart, but many of them, being selfish and foolish, are real hindrances to his spiritual growth. God, therefore, in His mercy, denies the fulfilment of his desires even at the cost of great pain. The poet is quite realistic when he says: "My desires are many and my cry is pitiful" (XIV, 9). But he is ever happy and contented. He acknowledges: "but ever didst thou save me by hard

\(^{13}\) Sadhana 53.

\(^{14}\) Sadhana 52.
refusals" (XIV, 9). And he asserts, "This strong mercy has been wrought into life through and through" (XIV, 9). The poet is so happy for day by day God is making him worthy of the single, great gifts that He gives to him unasked -- this sky and the light, this body and the life and the mind -- saving him from the perils of overmuch desire. Of course, there are times when he languidly lingers, and times when he awakens and hurries in search of his goal. Times are not rare when the Divine cruelly hides Himself from him. Nevertheless, he grants that, slowly, but steadily, the Infinite is making him worthy of His full acceptance by refusing him, thus, saving him from the perils of weak, uncertain desire.

Suffering and pain are messengers of God's love. God says to man: "I heal you, therefore I hurt; love you, therefore punish." The parallelism between this thought and the sayings of the Old Testament is evident: "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth" and

15 Collected Poems and Plays 295.
"Stripes that would cleanse away evil."  
Through suffering, God, in His "strong mercy", calls the poet's forgetful and erring heart back to His fatherly bosom. "Misery knocks at thy door, and her message is that thy lord is wakeful, and he calls thee to the love-tryst through the darkness of night" (XXVII, 16). The Lord is wakeful, but the poet has to make his way to him through the rough and tumble of life.

Tagore is not afraid of sorrow and pain; he welcomes it as a means of cleansing, perfection and enrichment. He prays that God may strike at the root of penury in his heart (XXXVI, 21). Like many mystics, especially in the vein St. Francis of Assisi, he prays:

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain but for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not look for allies on life's battlefield but to my own strength.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved but hope for the patience to win my freedom. Grant me that I may not be a coward, feeling your mercy in my success alone; but let me find the grasp of your hand in my failure.  

The poet of *Gitanjali* feels that failure and defeat, no less than success and triumph, are messengers of God's goodness. "I will deck thee with trophies, garlands of my defeat. It is never in my power to escape unconquered" (XCVIII, 64). In *Fruit Gathering* Tagore writes "My master has bid me, while I stand at the roadside, to sing the song of Defeat, for that is the bride whom He woos in secret."  

Tagore is convinced that pain and sorrow have a divine meaning as means of greater beauty and joy, and he prays that this gracious purpose may be fulfilled. The following lyric from *Fruit Gathering* illustrates

17 *Collected Poems and Plays* 215.  
18 *Collected Poems and Plays* 220.
the point.

The pain was great when the strings were being tuned, my Master!

Begin your music, and let me forget the pain; let me feel in beauty what you had in your mind through those pitiless days.¹⁹

Tagore’s mystic view of suffering is quite remarkable, in as much as it is novel in Indian religious literature. In traditional Hinduism suffering is looked upon primarily as evil, as a punishment for Karma experienced in Samsara. And liberation from suffering is the great goal of Hindu religious life. The Gita exhorts to disregard pain as well as pleasure; otherwise the peace of mind will be disturbed. But this attitude of indifference to pain and suffering is quite different from a positive evaluation of them which Tagore makes. To Tagore suffering is God’s gift to man. In poem no. 52 he writes, “Yet I shall bear in my heart this honour of the burden of pain, this gift of thine.”

Not even death could shake Tagore's faith in the ultimate joy and goodness of the universe. He had, as we have already pointed out, enough and more personal experience of the harvest of death in his family. Within a short period he lost his wife, two daughters, one son, his old father and a great friend. He had his first real acquaintance with death at the age of twenty-four, when his sister-in-law, his brother Jyotirindra's wife, whom he had loved and adored as a mother, died. In his Reminiscences he has described the terrible shock this unexpected loss made on him. He writes:

The acquaintance which I made with Death at the age of twenty-four was a permanent one, and its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an everlengthening chain of tears. That which I had held I was made to let go — this was the sense of loss which distressed me, — but when at the same moment I viewed it from the standpoint of freedom gained, a great peace fell upon me".

* Reminiscences, 257
He experiences that it is in dying that one is born to eternal life.

In the dualism of death and life Tagore finds a beautiful harmony. Poem no.95 of Gitanjali is one of the most remarkable in the whole collection. With an amazing boldness of creative imagination the poet compares Life and Death to the two breasts of the Divine Mother. The poem concludes, "The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation" (XCV, 63). The flower has to die to give life to the fruit, the fruit has to die to give life to the plant.20 Death is not the ultimate reality; it is a portal to a new life.21

Tagore the apostle of joyous suffering does not fear even death. Not only that he does not fear death, but even enters into mystical communion with it picturing it as a bridegroom and himself as the bride.

20 The Religion of Man 123.

21 Sadhana 42.
In poem no. 91 the poet addresses death as "the last fulfilment of life." He invites him "to come and whisper" to him. He confesses, "Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life" (XLI, 60). Just as a bride finds consummation and fulfilment in her union with the bridegroom, so also the poet's life will be consummated by union with Death. When he comes, the poet will offer to him all his hopes, all his joys and all his love. Just a glance of love from him will win the poet's heart for ever and like a bride he will surrender himself totally to his bridegroom.

The poet now feels the near presence of death. He imagines he is garlanding the bridegroom with the garlands that have already been woven with the flowers culled from his spiritual garden. After the wedding ceremony is over, the bride accompanies the bridegroom to his house where, in the darkness of night, the union takes place. The concrete is used to illustrate the highly abstract mystical truth of the poet's mystical communion with death, the finest and the most
profitable of all sufferings for the poet. Death enables him to be fully dissolved in the Divine, the Jivatma dissolves into the Paramatma.

Poem no. 86 pictures death as God's messenger (LXXXVI, 57). This again is a mystical attitude. Death has crossed the unknown sea and brought God's call to the poet. The night is dark and the poet's heart is fearful. Yet he will take up the lamp, open his gates and bow to death his welcome. He will worship death "with folded hands and with tears" (LXXXVI, 57). He will worship death "placing at his feet the treasure" (LXXXV, 57) of his heart.

Poem no. 83 reveals the infinite value God bestows on the Poet's tears of grief. The poet promises God, who is pictured as Mother, to weave 'a chain of pearls for his Mother's neck with his tears of sorrow' (LXXXIII, 55). And he avows, "this my sorrow is absolutely mine own, and when I bring it to thee as my offering, thou rewardest me with thy grace" (LXXXIII, 55-56). The poet is convinced that his tears are powerful enough to compel God to reward him with His grace, for the
tears are his own. They are, therefore, offerings in the real sense and are valued as such by the Almighty. Suffering purifies the poet's soul and brings him nearer to the heart of God. The mysticism of suffering traceable in this attitude of the poet needs no special emphasis.

According to Tagore even God is subject to suffering—the infinite pain the Almighty suffered while dividing himself into the myriad forms. This pang of separation pervades the whole universe. It spreads from star to star. It is heard in the rustling of the leaves in the dark, rainy months of July. "It is this overspreading pain that deepens into loves and desires, into sufferings and joys in human homes" (LXXXIV, 56). These are the ideas compressed and expressed in the eightyfourth lyric. Its concluding statement is very revealing and has a clear bearing on Tagore's poetic mysticism in Gitanjali which will be the topic of discussion in the next chapter. The poet clearly affirms that it is the overspreading pain that he referred to above that ever melts and flows in songs through his heart. Thus, the songs in Gitanjali
present the "still sad music" of the poet's heart. The poet's suffering is the stuff out of which the Gitanjali poems are made.

Tagore's mystical approach to suffering is clearly revealed in lyric sixty-eight. Out of His love God sends sunbeams to the poet. These sunbeams, with their outstretched arms, embrace him as a mother and fondle him with love and affection. They carry the cloud made by the tears and sighs of the suffering poet to God, who, out of His love and charity takes the 'offering' (the cloud made of the tears and the sighs of the poet), irradiates it with divine beauty, and imparts numerous, ever-shifting and changing colours, though He himself is awfully white, spotless and radiant in His beauty.

Though God is spotless, calm and serene, He loves His suffering child [the poet] more than others. His tears and sighs move God's heart, to envelop it with grief. They darken God's usual radiance as a cloud envelops the sky and obscures its starry brightness. God weeps with the poet and their tears become one and thus mystic communion between the poet and his God is
achieved. It is God's deep love for the poet that enables the poet's tears and sighs reach God.

The secret of the sweetness of the poems of Gitanjali is that they spring from a suffering heart. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot produce fruit." Only from a suffering heart can break melodies of sweet music. The poet-mystic's way is strenuous and hard. Communion with the Infinite is achieved only through the thick and thin of life. He goes through hard struggles. He dares dangers and difficulties at every step. Pain and suffering are his constant companions. But the communion thus achieved is extremely sweet. Divine bliss is forced to flow into the mystic's heart like the sweet music (LV, 36-37) of a singer with a broken heart. Indeed the Tagore of Gitanjali is a singer with a broken heart. But he has the necessary soul-force to be always "calm of mind, all passion spent." Tagore metaphorically presents this idea in the thirteenth poem.

22 John 12:24.

All his life the poet has been preparing himself to meet God, his Maker, but still his preparations are incomplete. He writes:

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day; I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument. The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set, only there is the agony of wishing in my heart. The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by. I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice, only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house (XIII, 8).

Here is a pointer to the aesthetic mysticism one of the essential ingredients of which is "infinite longing", verifiable in Gitanjali. The Tagore of Gitanjali 'rejoices' and 'suffers' as a poet. He is first and last a poet. Joy and sorrow are the twin pillars upon which the edifice of Gitanjali is built.