CHAPTER IX

HUMANISTIC MYSTICISM

The basic and most robust characteristic of Tagore's philosophy of life in Gitanjali is his emphasis on the importance of the human person. He has a deep-set conviction that there is no inherent contradiction between the claims of the flesh and the spirit, the human and the divine, love of life and love of God, social obligation and individual rights, respect for tradition and the freedom to experiment, love of one's people and faith in the unity of mankind. This faith runs through many of the poems of Gitanjali. The following citations will illustrate the point:

Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well (LXVII, 45). The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures (LXIX, 46). When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.... In this playhouse of infinite forms I have
had my play and here have I caught sight
of him that is formless (XCVI, 63).

Mysticism is the pronounced feature of Gitanjali. But humanism is not altogether absent in it. It is a pervading presence in many of the poems. As B.C. Chakraborty writes, "While romanticism and mysticism are the marked characteristics at certain stages of his poetic career, realism and humanism are to be found in his poetry from the beginning to the end." Of course his basic interest as a humanist lies in his concern for Nature, God and Man.

Humanity that has passed through bloody revolutions and the rise and fall of civilizations, is even now passing through the greatest of all revolutions. The poet in Gitanjali is the representative of this humanity, silently suffering the horrors even of bloody revolutions. Poem no. 18 begins, "Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens." The onward march of man towards perfection is hindered by the dark 'clouds'. The 'cloud' is symbolic of gloom, dejection, disappointment and

frustration. The poet keeps "gazing on the far-away
gloom of the sky" (XVIII, 11), and his "heart wanders
prays
wailing with the restless wind" (XVIII, 11). He to the
Divine Lover to stoop "to conquer" him and save him
from the perils of the world and grant him eternal peace
and liberty.

The poet asserts that God would condescend to fill
the emptiness in him and in the world. After exclaiming,
"what emptiness do you gaze upon!", he asks with full
optimism: "Do you not feel a thrill passing through
the air with the notes of the far-away song floating
from the other shore?" (XXI, 13). He hopes he will be
granted celestial peace.

Tagore was always grieved to see the mind in fear
and the head held so low, knowledge in fetters, and the
world broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls,
and words coming out from the depth of untruth, and
where the clear stream of reason had lost its way into
the dreary desert sand of dead habit. As a great
humanist he prays to let his country awake into "that
heaven of freedom" (XXXV, 20). "where the mind is
without fear and the head is held high; where knowledge
is free; where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls, where words come out from the depth of truth; where tireless striving stretches its arms to perfection (XXXV, 20). Tagore laments the loss of reason and its decay into the dreary desert sand of dead habit (XXXV, 20). And his final request in this poem is to lead his mind into ever-widening thought and action. The poet would lead his mind to thought and action. This is absolutely essential for human progress. Tagore's humanism is mystical in Gitanjali in as much as he tries to become more human by being ever in communion with the Divine. His oneness with the Infinite enables him to be a better man.

The poet of Gitanjali prays to the Father in right earnest to "strike at the root of penury" (XXXVI, 21) in his heart i.e., to remove his spiritual poverty. He prays to Him, again, to make him strong enough to bear easily the joys and sorrows of life, and the grace to serve others with love and sympathy. He also prays to be made spiritually strong so that he may never flatter the powerful, the insolent and the proud. He
would always befriend the poor and protect them from the oppression of the mighty. The Almighty should uplift and ennoble his mind so that he will be least disturbed by the trifling joys and sorrows, successes and failures of life. Above all he requests the strength Almighty enough to surrender himself gladly to Him.

Humanistic mysticism is evident in poem no. 4 also. As a man the poet will ever try to keep his body pure, knowing well that the Infinite's touch is upon all his limbs. He will try to keep all untruths out from his thoughts, knowing that the Infinite is that truth which has kindled the light of reason in his mind. Again, it will be the constant endeavour of the poet to drive all evils away from his heart and keep his love in bloom, for the Divine has His seat in the inmost shrine of his heart.

Herein one finds another aspect of the Tagorean humanistic mysticism. The poet is very much aware of the Divine enshrined in his heart. Poem no. 20 conveys the mystical truth that God lives in the poet's heart of hearts. Of course, the poet is late in discovering this truth. He confesses, "I knew not then that it
was so near, that it was mine, and that this perfect
sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart" (XX, 12). The "perfect sweetness" is the sweetness
of the Infinite, i.e. the Infinite Himself.

Another dimension of the humanistic mysticism is
reached when the poet realizes that the Divine who
resides in the depths of his being has made him know
friends whom he did not know. He has also given him
seats in alien homes. And he has brought the distant
near and made a brother of the stranger. He affirms,
"Through birth and death, . . . wherever thou leadeat
me it is thou, the same, the one companion of my endless
life who ever linkest my heart with bonds of joy to
the unfamiliar" (LXIII, 42). The climax of the Tagorean
humanistic mysticism is reached when the poet
confesses, "When one knows thee, then alien there is
none, then no door is shut" (LXIII, 42). He realizes
the "touch of the one in the play of the many" (LXIII,
42). The poet grasps the basic truth that all forms
of life are so many different manifestations of the
same Supreme Reality. And his prayer is that he may
never miss the bliss of God manifested in the myriad men and women who are his brothers and sisters through the common bond of human love.

Another trait of the humanistic mysticism in Gitanjali is that the poet identifies the Infinite in the humble humanity with whom He mixes on equal terms. For the poet to partake of the joys and sorrows of humanity and to become one with it is to become one with the Infinite Himself. For him to love his fellow men and to help them in their sorrows is to love the Almighty Himself.

In poem no. 10 the poet asserts, "Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, the lowliest and lost" (X.6). The Divine lives among the humblest and the lowliest and the poet searches for Him there. For the poet of Gitanjali true worship of the Infinite means mingling with humble humanity on terms of equality and participation in their humble activities. The rich and the proud can never find the Infinite for they keep aloof from the poor and the down-trodden. Wealth and the consequent
pride are obstacles in the way of communion with the Divine. Service to his fellowmen in love and sympathy is his highest form of worship and one of the finest ways in which the poet communes with the Designer Infinite.

Poem no. 64 exposes the uselessness of empty religious rituals, devoid of the authentic spiritual communion. True worship consists not in the performance of rites and ceremonies, but in extending a helping hand to the suffering and the needy. He proves his position with a parable (LXIV, 42-43). His house was dark and lonely. He was in search of some light to lighten it. At dusk he meets a girl with a lighted lamp in her hand. He begs her to give him that lamp as he was very much in need of it. But she refuses the poet's request on the ground that it was 'dedicated to the sky (LXIV, 43). The poet sees it "uselessly burning" in the void. Many other lamps were also lighted to celebrate the festival of lamps, but none was offered to the poet who was in real need of it.

The poet of Gitanjali condemns isolation in an ivory tower and makes a powerful plea for participation
in the daily activity of humble humanity. In poem no. 11 he advises the priest, "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!" (XI, 6). He chides him, "Whom dost thou worship in this lonely, dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?" And he tells him, "Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!" Then he assures him, "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones." He continues, "He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust." The poet also advises the priest, "Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil" (XI, 7).

The mystical overtone clearly appears in the mantric confession, "Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation, he is bound with us all forever" (XI, 7). This humanistic concern is stretched to its farthest limits in Gitanjali so much so that the reader should tread his path warily lest he might fall into a facile identification of Tagorean humanism with the streak of pantheistic flavour running across the work.
In the same poem Tagore emphasizes the need for hard work. Mysticism has its dual dimensions -- contemplation and activity. Work is worship. The poet exhorts the priest, "Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow" (XI, 7). The spirit of humanitarianism and a deep interest in the abiding truths of life and also an abounding joy in the environmental details of daily life "in all levels of society are the marked features of Tagore's poetry," writes B.C. Chakraborty.

Tagore has always stood for harmony, synthesis and reconciliation. Hence the combination of mysticism and humanitarianism in Gitanjali would, then, no longer, baffle the critics. He writes in The Religion of Man, "The idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book." Immediately he avows, "This thought of God has not grown in my mind through any process of philosophical reasoning. On the contrary it has followed the current of my

2 Chakraborty 293.

3 The Religion of Man 11.
temperament from early days until suddenly it flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision." Tagore continues, "The experience which I have described in one of the chapters which convinced me that on the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge."

In Tagore's *Gitanjali* man occupies a focal position. Even the Supreme person has to come down to man for making himself real and actual. Nature also contributes to the make-up of human personality. It is a relation of harmony between man and nature, between man and man and between man and the Jivandevata which makes the world of men in *Gitanjali*. Tagore envisages a man free from brutality and ugliness finding his freedom and fruition in his diverse acts of creativity.

The Tagore of *Gitanjali* sings to the glory of man.

4 *The Religion of Man* 11.


6 *The Religion of Man* 11.
Man is the hero of many of the *Gitanjali* poems. The poet mingles his voice with the voice of the tiller, the pathmaker, the beggar, the flower girl and above all with the poorest, and lowliest, and lost. He prefers a seat with the common man in spiritual salvation.

The union between the finite and the Infinite in love is the essence of any religious mystical experience. It has been made abundantly clear in these pages that there is such a mystical experience in *Gitanjali*. But so far the nature of this union has not been presented in clear terms. Do the Infinite and the finite unite in such a way that both lose their identity? Or, do they unite only in love, preserving their proper identities? The following chapter on monistic-dualistic mysticism discusses this problem.