CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION OF MYSTICISM AND THE INDIAN CONCEPT OF MYSTICISM AS REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES.

I

The word "mystes" which means one initiated into the mysteries, is derived from the Greek word "muein", - "to keep silence". Mysticism, thus, is the belief that knowledge of God and of real truth is independent of the mind and the senses. This knowledge is inaccessible to the understanding and can be obtained through contemplation or spiritual insight. The concept is best explained in the language of the Taittiriya Upanishad: "Yato vaco nivartante, aprapya manasa saha". - (from which words turn away without attaining the supreme and the mind also retires baffled). The term mysticism, therefore, has been commonly used to cover:

i) the first-hand experience of direct communion with God or the Ultimate Reality; and

ii) the theologico-metaphysical doctrine of the soul's possible union with the Absolute Reality or God.

Mysticism shares a common world with magic, prayer, worship, religion and metaphysics. It may not be easy to distinguish mysticism from these but its approach and emphasis are different. Prayer, worship and religion may form a part of mysticism but they are usually viewed as means and not as essence; also, they are usually continuations of sensory experience, whereas mysticism is a pure unitary consciousness or a union with God. As for magic and metaphysics, it is analytic and discursive and expresses itself and its findings in precise and abstract formulas; mysticism, however, like poetry, depends more on paradoxes and an unusual use of language. Philosophies may lead to or follow from mysticism, but they are not the same.

Mysticism thus, among the many forms of experience, confirms the claims of religion and is viewed as providing a foretaste of life after death.
There are various definitions of mysticism. Some of them are:

i) "Mysticism is the immediate experience of oneness with the Ultimate Reality. When we call mysticism an experience of oneness, we mean that the relationship into which the mystic is inducted transcends the ordinary distinctions between the subject and the object or between I and Thou. And the term 'Ultimate Reality' in the definition seeks to make clear that the mystic knows himself to be involved with no more idea or thing but with that beyond which nothing can be known or imagined."

ii) Mysticism has been defined by Edward Caird as,

"religion in its most concentrated and exclusive form", as, "that attitude of the mind in which all other relations are swallowed up in the relation of the soul to God."


3. Ibid., p. 1129.
iii) Mysticism may be defined as the belief in a third kind of knowledge, the other two being sense knowledge and knowledge by inference. Adolf Lasson writes:

"The essence of Mysticism is the assertion of an intuition which transcends the temporal categories of the understanding ... Rationalism cannot conduct us to the essence of things; we therefore need intellectual vision." 4

iv) The medieval theistic view of mysticism was that it was:

"a stretching out of the soul into God through the urge of love, an experimental knowledge of God through unifying love." 5

Its other name was joy, and the endeavour of the mystic to grasp the divine essence or ultimate reality helped him to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the highest.

v) Mysticism arises when a man tries to bring the urge towards a communion with God -

"a Being conceived as the supreme and ultimate reality." 6

according to the British scholar William Ralph Inge.

5. Ibid., p. 787.
6. Ibid., p. 787.
A 19th century scholar, Otto Pfleiderer, indicated that religious mysticism is:

"the immediate feeling of unity of the self with God: it is nothing, therefore, but the fundamental feeling of religion, the religious life at its very heart and centre."  

The British writer Richard Nettleship, however, suggests a corrective element, that of wholeness and symbolism.

"Mysticism is the consciousness that everything that we experience is an element, and only an element, i.e., that in being what it is, it is symbolic of something else."  

"Mysticism in religion is an immediate knowledge of a spiritual presence and a sense of direct contact with it. In religions with a belief in a personal God, mysticism may involve a direct communion with the supreme being. A mystical experience may come through visions or ecstasies, or through meditation (the turning of the mind on itself and into the realm of the spirit). Mysticism in philosophy is the experience of personal union with the ultimate reality, and is the belief that the chief end of man is to seek such a union. Philosophical mysticism often becomes a pantheism that sees God in all things."  

7. Ibid., p. 787  
3. Ibid., p. 787.  
In the Indian scriptures, mysticism is taken to mean the non-rational, the non-ordinary experience of the all-inclusive reality or God, whereby the separateness of the individual self is merged, at least partially, with the reality, regarded as the ground of the existence of all things. It may thus be defined as the doctrine that the ultimate reality (whether an impersonal absolute or a personal divine) can be known directly and intimately by an immediate intuition. It is also used in the sense of a living faith in or a direct awareness of the all-pervading spirit which is one with the indwelling spirit in man. The best minds of India have always held mysticism to be the source and ultimate proof of the teachings of philosophy and of religion. The fathers of the Hindu religion, the vedic seers, were mystics who embodied in inspired words what they saw in (mysticism) mystic-vision. Rabindranath Tagore belongs to this line of mystic-poets who have an inner vision and seek to convey the truths thus visioned in the language of ordinary experience.
The concise oxford dictionary defines a mystic as 'one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding.' Broadly speaking, a mystic believes that the ordinary world of sense perception is not real, and behind this visible world there is a more real world which can be apprehended spiritually and not through the medium of the senses. The following exquisite lines from Sri Aurobindo's SAVITRI express the true concept and nature of mysticism:

A light not born of sun or moon or fire,
A light that dwelt within and saw within shedding an intimate visibility,
Made secrecy more revealing than the word:
Our sight and sense are a fallible gaze and touch
And only the spirit's vision is wholly true.

(The Finding of the Soul. Book Seven,
Canto Five, lines 109-114).

It is to this light that Rabindranath Tagore refers to when, in one of his songs, he tells us of his intention to look inward now that there is no earthly light. He, in fact, is actually longing for that great hidden light described in the Rig-Veda as 'qudham jyotih'10. "I am the light of the world".
says Jesus Christ, "he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Once this light is perceived by the mystic, he is filled with exultation. The experience of this light, actually an experience of Reality can be twofold: (i) Extrovertive and (ii) Introvertive. In the experience described as extrovertive, the mystic looks outwardly at the external world and discovers the ONE there. A fine example of extrovertive mysticism can be found in the verses of Wordsworth, for he could discern in Nature the presence of the Universal Spirit:

... And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.12


The introvertive experience of turning inward is not necessarily a better or a greater one, although it is generally regarded as of greater significance. At least, it is found to be more important in the history of mystical literature. In this approach, the ONE is found at the bottom of the ego, at the base of the human psyche. Therefore, the apprehension is direct. Brahman or the Absolute, according to the Upanishads, cannot be known in any other way since it is:

... unseen, incapable of being spoken of, ungraspable, without any distinctive marks, unthinkable, unnameable, the essence of the knowledge of the one self, that into which the world is resolved, the peaceful, the benign, the non-dual ... He is the self; He is to be known.13

Man, our scriptures say, has in him the divine spark and therefore longs for union with the divine. In most men this longing lies dormant. However, in the mystics, this longing is at its greatest intensity. Many mystics believe that incessant aspiration that marks our life on earth is something that was in existence before our present life and will continue after

death. As the Bhagavad Gita so precisely tells us in the second chapter:

The Atman slays not, nor is it slain; it is neither born, nor it dies; it is unborn, eternal and constant; it is not killed when the body is slain.14

The bodies are to souls what garments are to the wearers to be discarded when they are old and worn out in favour of new ones.

As a man casts off his worn-out garments, so also the embodied Atman enters into others that are new.15

It is this belief which is the basis of the mystic’s fearless attitude to old age and death. And this very idea of the immortality of the soul, implicit in Plato’s maxim "All knowledge is recollection" is the basis of Wordsworth’s "Immortality Ode".

15. Ibid., p. 24.
According to the mystic, it is possible for a man to identify himself with his true self. The required effort thus enables a mystic to have an intuitive knowledge of the divine or the ultimate truth. However, the total indivisible truth is beyond ordinary mortals. This truth is actually hidden deep inside the recesses of a cave and is revealed only before the mind’s eye of the mystic. This is true wisdom, the state of Prajna — as the Buddhists call it. According to the Nirvana-Sutra (of the Mahayana school of Buddhism), Nirvana meaning eternal life or salvation or enlightenment, is attained only when there is knowledge and when the mind is liberated from thirst, cravings, and conditionality of the world. Since autonomy is regarded as one of its qualities, Nirvana is not merely Sunyata or emptiness, a purely negative idea, but has something dynamic about it. Christian mystics, on the other hand, describe God as pure nothingness, a "desert" or a "wilderness". Just as God is considered to be the light of lights He is also the embodiment of darkness. This kind of mysticism is best
explained in the following passage from the Chhandogya Upanishad:

At one point, a father orders his son to cut open a seed and to say what is in it. There is, of course, nothing but from this nothing would have sprung forth forests of mustard plants, and the father says to his son "Thou art that."16

The Indian seers have very wisely expressed the above concept: In NOTHING lies EVERYTHING and in EVERYTHING lies NOTHING. True mysticism can never be self-seeking:

"The Christian mystics have always emphasized that mystical union with God brings with it an intense and burning love of God which must needs overflow into the world in the form of love for our fellow-men; and that this must show itself in deeds of charity, mercy and self-sacrifice, and not merely in words."17

It is this love of our fellow-men that was the principal ideal of the practical mystic-monk Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of one of the greatest of Indian mystics, Sri Rama Krishna. Love of man

therefore is a kind of service to God, for God dwells in every man. The Vedas emphatically declare: "Eko vasi Sarvabhothantara-atma" (He is the indweller in all beings), "Mamaivamso Jeevaloke Jeevabhoota Sanatanah"—(The eternal resides in every being of the world as a fragment of mine). Man can thus elevate himself morally and spiritually and establish a close communion with his fellow-beings and nature. There is yet another ethical aspect of this strange spiritual phenomenon called mysticism. Mysticism often asserts that all evil is nothing but an illusion as all Reality is generally regarded as good. Moreover, in the mystic-vision, the whole world is found worthy of love and worship—"apparelled in celestial light" as Wordsworth puts it in the "Immortality Ode".

IV

Western authors, that have felt and dealt with the concept of mysticism ascribe three stages or successive mystical ways in attaining oneness with the Absolute Reality. They are:
"(i) The Purgative, (ii) The illuminative and (iii) The Contemplative."18

The Purgative way consists in the preliminary elimination of worldly attachments and the destruction of the passions which originate from such attainments. The next stage of the mystic is the illuminative way. A garden plant produces a new abundance of flowers when the weeds undermining its vitality are removed. Similarly, our spirit can have a freer and fuller play in the newly liberated sectors of consciousness, with increasing enlightenment, once we make ourselves free from the trammels of the world. Finally, there is the supreme stage, the contemplative way. This is entered upon when the battle against the unregenerate human nature, having been won, the objective visions

of the glorious world are replaced by the experience of union between the mystic seeker and the divine object sought after. This is the highest achievement of which a man is capable of, "the return of the undifferentiated creature to the resplendent infinitude of the creator."19.

The Indian scriptures, on the other hand, provide guidelines for the ultimate realization of the Infinite. The Vedas - together with the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads - provide the steps for the proper conduct of the four ashramas (stages) in life - Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa. In addition, they also serve as essential guides in the pursuit of the four Purusharthas (the basic goals of life) - Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha (Righteousness, material well-being, desire and realization or liberation).

Indian culture and tradition is based on the authority and message of the Vedas. Veda means that which demonstrates the
Divine principle. In fact, the Veda permeates the universe. It is the embodiment of truth. It flows in eight streams:

i) **Sabdabrahmamayee:** Manifesting as the all-pervading cosmic sound;

ii) **Charaacharamayee:** Pervading all moving and unmoving objects;

iii) **Jyotirmayee:** All-pervading effulgence;

iv) **Vaanqmayee:** Sacred-speech;

v) **Nityanandmayee:** Eternal-bliss;

vi) **Paraatparamayee:** Embodiment of the omni-will;

vii) **Mayamayee:** Manifestation as maya or illusion;

viii) **Srimayee:** The embodiment of all prosperity.

The Upanishads very aptly describe the all-pervasiveness of the undescrivable: "Antarbahischa tathsarvam vyaapya narayano 20
sthithah" - pervading the entire cosmos inside and outside remains Narayana. Therefore it is possible only to realize and not search for the ONE who is all-pervasive. However, it is not possible to realize God by sadhanas, yagas or vajnas or good deeds.

20. Sri Ramakrishna Math (ed.): op.cit., p. 25.
All these are only aids for achieving purity of mind and heart. This truth has been clearly enunciated by Sri Krishna in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita:

Neither by the Vedas, nor by austerities, nor by gifts, nor by sacrifices, can I be seen in this form as you (Arjuna) have seen me.21

What then, is the purpose of these sadhanas, which are being performed by earnest and knowledgeable aspirants? All these sadhanas are intended to help man to get rid of the veil in which he is enveloped by Raga (attachment) and Dwesha (hatred). The inner meaning of all spiritual discipline is to make man realize his true nature.

Man inherently is the embodiment of Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Awareness-Bliss). Sat is the unchanging state which is unaffected by the processes of TIME (the past, the present and the future). Chit is the capacity of awareness which enables one to know the

outer and the inner truth about everything. Ananda is that state of unalloyed bliss which is pure and permanent. Although Sat-Chit and Ananda appear to be distinct, their unity can be illustrated by an example. The flame of a lamp has three features: heat, light and red colour. Although these three features are distinct, the flame is one. Thus, the essence of all the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Shastras is that man is essentially divine by nature and the Atma that resides in all beings is ONE and ONE alone. This Atma or divinity represents the unity of Sat-Chit-Ananda. The term "daiva" or divinity itself means wholeness or immanence. Therefore, Prakriti or creation cannot exist in the absence of Purusa or God. In modern parlance, this may be stated as:

\[ \text{Matter + Being} = \text{God} \]
The highest function of mysticism is to set free the soul from the entanglements of life in order that it may rise to the level of Truth and Beauty and become one with her. In other words, mysticism brings us to the essence of things, which is eternal and not temporary. A mystic like an inspired poet is often described as possessed by some fine frenzy of the eye rolling through infinite space and viewing all things at one glance. He has an innate impulse for organisation. Like in Hamlet there is an unconscious method in his dealing with life. His intuitive impulse is so strong and vital like a living thing that it develops an instinctive process of beautiful selection and rejection. In such moments when the intuitive flame begins to glow, thoughts leap into order and the subjective world opens the prison-gate of mystery to the spirit of Truth and Beauty long concealed within it. This is the moment of the vision of the mystic. It was in moments like these that Shakespeare said:

There's a Divinity that shapes our ends
Rough hew them how we will. (Hamlet).
All functions of mysticism are based on the doctrine or the belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of Ultimate Reality, is attainable through immediate intuition, insight or illumination. John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist, has summed up the mystic position:

Such as men themselves are, such will God Himself seem to them to be.

For as it takes two to communicate the truth, one to speak and one to hear, so our knowledge of God is precisely and accurately limited by our capacity to receive him. The following poem from Gitanjali shows how the love of the mystic can only find its consumation in worship:

Yes, I know this is nothing but Thy love, O Beloved of my heart - this golden light that dances upon the leaves, these idle clouds sailing across the sky, this passing breeze leaving its coolness upon my forehead. The morning light has flooded my eyes - this is Thy message to my heart. Thy face is bent from above. Thy eyes look down on my eyes, and my heart has touched thy feet.

(LIX, p. 38).

All mystics alike agree in this respect that unity underlies diversity. This is their starting point and their goal, the basic
fact of mysticism, which in its widest sense may be described as an attitude of the mind founded upon an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness, of likeness in all things. This is the ultimate end of man, to find the one which is in him; which is the truth; which is his soul; they key with which he opens the gates of the spiritual life. The nearer one approaches our real selves the more harmonious our lives become. To achieve this unity with the Ultimate Reality, one has to journey long and far, but the end is sure and it will definitely come. In one of the most beautiful of his songs, Tagore says:

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.
I came on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wilderness of worlds, leaving my track on many a star and planet.
It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.
The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the world to reach the innermost shrine at the end.
My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said, "Here art thou!".

(Gitanjali xii, p.7.)
The aim of my thesis is to study the poetical works of Tagore - to find out how far his response to the mystical tradition has constituted to be a significant element of his works. This investigation involves a close and careful study of all his poetical works in English against a background of the interaction of the mystical tradition and the modern conditions. This problem has been touched upon by a large no. of scholars in the literary world. But, in the midst of the proliferating commentaries on Tagore's mysticism, no one has gone for an exhaustive assessment of his mystical outlook, which has remained a constant and a specific element of his life and his art.

This introductory chapter gives an emphasis on the meaning and the significance of mysticism. For a more convenient study the work has been divided into six chapters.

Chapter I : Introduction

Chapter II : The Socio-Cultural Background and Influences.

Chapter III : Mysticism in Tagore's Poetry before Gitanjali.

Chapter IV : Mysticism in Gitanjali.

Chapter V : Mysticism in Tagore's Poetry after Gitanjali.

Chapter VI : Conclusion: Tagore's Achievement as a Mystic.