CHAPTER II

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

I

In this thesis, I have tried to concentrate on the mystical element in the poetical works of Tagore and also to present the chief facts from Tagore's private life relevant to the specific aim of such a study. I start with the formative period of Tagore's life and art - his family background, his education, his society, his readings and his philosophical propensities etc., and then proceed to an examination of his concept of tradition, which will ultimately emerge as the mystical tradition. Thereafter I examine his poems in chronological order with a view to portray the evolution of his ideas in the mystical aspect. My emphasis will be on the poetical expression and the values of his mystical consciousness.

In the succeeding chapters an attempt is made to discuss the mind and works of Rabindranath Tagore in order to bring forth the mystical element that is inherent in his poetry.
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was one of the most important creative writers of this century. His poetry shows such finesse and cohesion in form, matter and feeling as would have been otherwise, incomprehensible in our language. Tagore’s poetry is in no way a sequence of the new poetry of the school of Michael Madhusudan Dutta nor of the romantic poetry of Biharilal Chakravarthi. It is all his own. And yet he is rooted deep in the soil of his land. He had drunk deeper than anyone else, from the mainsprings of Indian poetry: the native and grand mysticism of the Upanishads, the delicate tracery of Kalidasa and the emotional music of the Vaishnava poets. He is the most Indian of the Indian poets as well as the most universal. He was always open to receive from every quarter and from every source – from English poetry to the Bengali nursery rhyme, from the most elaborate classical symphony to the simplest rustic tune. But whatever he received he always made his own compositions: he was incapable of any kind of imitation.

Tagore was a very well-read man and he had a keen interest in everything having a permanent value. Tagore’s poetry in English is as much Indian as it is universal, because he has gone to the
deepest where the stream of eternal life runs, the ultimate source of creation and continuation of life in every form. His poetry is universal not only in the sense that the essence of all true poetry is universal but also in the sense that his notation is universal from the Indian point of view.

Rabindranath Tagore was home-bred in the fullest sense. He had uncertain schooling for few years in Calcutta, where his family had been settled for more than a century, and for about a year and a half in London. But he had been given at home a solid grounding in Bengali, Sanskrit and English as well as in the rudiments of science including astronomy. He was interested in music from childhood and had received training from some of the best music masters of the day, who were either family friends or were in their day. Gymnastic including wrestling was an item of his daily routine, and it served to make his healthy physique healthier. In fact, before he was fifty he had never been seriously ill. For a proper understanding of his poetry this fact is very significant. His poetry was produced by a very healthy mind housed in an uncommonly strong, healthy and handsome body.
It was indeed fortunate that from the very beginning the life of the school was extremely distasteful to Tagore and he could not be weaned from his home education. The atmosphere of Tagore's home was charged with the lively currents of cultural impulse, absorbent as well as creative. Devendranath Tagore's fascination for the sayings of the Upanishads, his outlook of a worshipful university, his strong adherence to the fundamentals of Indian thought and culture and his enthusiasm for constructive nationalism had made his home the centre of cultural revival in India. This gave the family a distinctiveness which was manifest in all their activities.

Devendranath Tagore was the eldest son of a very rich and influential man, but he had forced himself to live like a commoner for years rather than repudiate his late father's commitments. When Rabindranath Tagore was born the family fortune had been largely recovered but the domestic life continued to be on a simple scale. Young Rabindranath was clothed and fed almost like an ordinary middle-class boy. But there was a vital difference between Rabindranath and his contemporaries in the middle-class families in Calcutta. Tagore did not have the
social contacts available to a boy from an ordinary middle-class home. As he was the youngest of his mother's fourteen issues, Tagore's mother could not give him the attention she had given to his elder brothers. From his fourth or fifth year he was banished from his mother's quarters and put in the care of servants. In his Reminiscences Tagore has told us how the servant in charge would keep him confined and how he would be looking on for hours together at the slice of the landscape visible from the window in a first floor room of the servants' quarter, and how his childhood fancies would ride on the clouds and run with the wind.

Tagore passed his boyhood days at home but always, he periodically felt an irresistible urge for going out, far and near. He travelled all over the civilized world, and was received everywhere with warmth and spontaneous welcome; he was accorded receptions that was beyond the expectation of even a foreign potentate. He produced poetry in every land, wherever he went. But he always liked to come back home to his corner at Shantiniketan, a tiny settlement in what was then a dreary spot in West Bengal, just a hundred miles from his ancestral home in Calcutta and its civilized comforts.
The quest of the poet's soul was like a continuous game of hide and seek, idle fancy and ceaseless endeavour, incubation and fight, contemplation and realization. The metaphor of the alternating season is a favourite device in Tagore's poetry: to him it symbolizes the universe that pulsates in alternating appearance and disappearance, the nature that pulsates in night and day and throbs between life and death, and his own destiny swinging between the known and the unknown, hanging between the realized and the unreal, and oscillating between the real and the unreal.

II

Tagore had his first taste of literature from his caretakers and from some elderly members of the family retinue. They would read aloud the poems of Krittivasa and Kasiram and would recite alliterative verses from Dasarathi Ray's poetry or they would sing lines from the songs of Madhu Kan. The pathos of the Rama story told by Krittivasa, the wonder of the Mahabharata tales told by Kasiram, the jingle of the tripping lines of Dasarathi's verse and the sweet sentimentality of Madhu Kan made the first
impressions on the child's highly imaginative mind. The next such literary impression was made by the recital of Meghaduta by his eldest brother Dwijendranath. He did not know anything of Sanskrit yet, but the music of Kalidasa's verses enthralled him. Years later when he read the poem in original he was doubly impressed, as he found in it an unmistakable echo of the adventurous fancy of his childhood when during the rainy days he had watched the clouds from the window in the servant's room.

The Tagore family was the real fountainhead of the "national" movement that went hand in hand with the cultural revival. It is therefore expected that the earliest specimens of Tagore's juvenilia were patriotic and influenced by Hemchandra Banerji's poetry (particularly by his Bharatsanqit - song of India). Tagore had his first real outing away from Calcutta when at the age of twelve he was taken by his father on a long tour up to the Himalayan Punjab. As a result the Himalayas appear repeatedly in his earliest poems (1873-1875) which are mainly romantic narratives of disappointed love. These poems show the influence of the poets, Indian and English, that he was then reading and admiring.
A more effective result was obtained when the young aspirant to poetic fame took to imitating Vaishnava lyrics, specially the songs of Vidyapathi, somewhat after the manner of Thomas Chatterton in his "Rowley Poems". The poems (or songs, for they were written as such and set to music) carry, after the manner of the Vaishnava poets, the signature of the poet as "Bhanu Simha". Appearing for the first time in Bharati (1877) these "Bhanu-Simha" poems created a stir in the literary world as they were then believed to have been recovered from an old manuscript of a forgotten Vaishnava poet. Naturally Tagore did not think much of these poems, but it must be admitted that they show a command of the form of Vaishnava poetry rarely noticeable after the seventeenth century. This apparent maturity in the immature young poet came from his metrical exercises on Jayadeva and his close study of the poems of Vidyapati and Govinda Das.

In Indian mystical thought, Rabindranath Tagore offers a system in which the theism of the Bhagavad Gita, the metaphysics of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the mysticism of the Bauls and the philosophical principles of Vaishnavism and sufism exist in synthesis. He essentially is a theistic philosopher. To him the Ultimate Reality is a personal God who has infinite qualities. He
always felt that he had a communion with a divine being. This spiritual consciousness, a deep feeling of oneness with the unseen, the indivisible one, the omnipresent and the omniscient eternal truth was the guiding factor that led him to worship the Truth all his life. This thought of oneness with the Supreme Being is, in fact, the crux of Hindu philosophy. According to the highest thoughts of Hindu philosophy the ever blissful "Brahma" resides in every heart. Right from the Vedic days India has been singing to the glory of that Supreme Being. Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Chandidas, Vidyapathi, Sri Ramakrishna and Tagore, all sang to the glory of that indivisible infinite Supreme Power. Thus, if the Upanishads sang to the glory of Supreme Power in one way, if the great Vaishnava poets sang to the glory of humanity in another way and if Nanak, Kabir and Ramanuja had given a third dimension, it was perhaps left to Tagore to bring a fusion of all these. His poetry is therefore a harmony of thoughts completely oriental to the roots presented to a new world.
The essential unity of all creation is the fundamental doctrine of Indian philosophy. The Vedas begin with polytheism at the initial stage and finally develop into monotheism. (Tagore has quoted a number of passages from the Vedas, specially the Rig-Veda, in his writings. He, in fact, adopts the educational ideals of the Vedic age in which the individual was allowed to grow up in harmony with the external world.) The monotheistic conception of God becomes dominant in the "Purusa Sukta". God or Purusa is both transcendent and immanent. The "Purusa Sukta" explains its monotheistic conception thus:

The Purusa who has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet - He encompasses the earth in all directions and transcends it beyond a span. The Purusa alone is all this - all that had existed and will exist. And He is the Lord of immortality. For He manifests Himself for giving us the food of experience. Such is His manifest power. But greater than that is the Purusa Himself. For all mortal beings are only a fourth part of Him.1

Thus it can be observed that in Vedic monotheism God is regarded as one manifested in the world by one-fourth and three-fourths of Him remains beyond the world. However as this monotheistic conception fails to satisfy the Vedic seers, who sought the absolute truth, they turn to monism, where God is described as "Sat". It includes everything in it. All things come out of it and return to it. In western thought such a conception of God is called "Panentheism" (Pan-all, en-in, theos-God) not "Pantheism" (All is God). Thus, the development of the idea of God in the Vedas starts from polytheism, develops into monotheism and finally consummates in the absolutistic conception of God.

Devendranath Tagore was devoted to the Upanishads and therefore Tagore, too, came under the influence of the philosophy of the Upanishads. S.B. Mukherjee writes:

Tagore, like Dante, inherited a rich and vast tradition where mythology, theology blended easily - a tradition that was in his blood and that he drank deep into since childhood - the Upanishads. 2

As has already been said, Rabindranath Tagore had a thorough mastery of the Upanishads for he quoted select verses very frequently. He had before him the example of his father, Devendranath Tagore, who had spent his life in the contemplation of God without neglecting the duties of his earthly life. Tagore says:

The writer has been brought up in a family where the texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship; and he had before him the example of his father who lived his lone life in closest communion with God while not neglecting his duties to the world or allowing his keen interest in all human affairs to suffer any abatement.

He further writes:

To me the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit, and therefore, endowed with boundless vital growth, and I have used them, both in my life and in my preachings...
Tagore says:

I was born in a family which at that time was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based on the philosophy of Upanishads.5

The Upanishads have been the perennial source of diverse schools of thought. They have the monotheistic conception of the Ultimate Reality. From the subjective standpoint it is called "Atman" and from the objective point of view it is called "Brahman". But "Atman" and "Brahman" are not two different realities. These are two aspects of the same Reality. "Atman" is the consciousness and "Brahman" is the being of the universe. In the Upanishads they are conceived to be one and the same reality. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore, as observed by S. Radhakrishnan, form a modern commentary on the Upanishads. In almost all of his philosophical writings like Sadhana (1913), Nationalism (1917), Personality (1917), Creative Unity (1922), The Religion of Man (1931), Man (1932) and the Dharma, Sanchaya and the Shantiniketan

sermons. Tagore often quotes the verses of the Upanishads and the main idea of the Upanishads appear again and again though somewhat modified by Vaishnavism. The very first verse of the Isa Upanishad (Isa vasyam idam sarvam) was the guiding principle and perennial source of inspiration in his life. He owes the concept of divine immanence directly to the Upanishads. However, he is temperamentally opposed to puritanism, asceticism, and impersonal idealism of some of the Upanishads and he chooses to emphasise, like the Vaishnavas, those aspects of the Upanishads which teach that the finite is created by the Infinite out of its spontaneous joy and endless love, and is, therefore not illusory but real. Thus for Tagore, the infinite is nothing if it is not expressed in the finite. The Upanishadic phrase dearer to the poet's heart and definitely more central to his philosophy as a whole is anandarupam yadvibhati - the infinite that is resplendent in exuberant joy. This highest truth - eternal and all-embracing reality or personal God - can only be seen by the poet as shining through the world of appearance.
The Upanishadic vision is both cosmic and acosmic, immanent and transcendental. The Upanishadic seers and most other mystics denigrate the individual. For them the value and destiny of the individual is to rise to a level of meditative devotion, where the individual self ceases to be individual; it dissolves without remainder in the All, as a drop of water loses its identity completely in the ocean. In the Mundaka Upanishad (III, 2.9.8) it is stated that "just as the following rivers disappear in the ocean casting off name and shape — Yatha nadvas svandamanas samudre astam qacchanti nama rupe vihaya — even so the knower freed from name and shape — tatha vidvan nama rupad vimukta — attains to the divine person, higher than the high — parat-param purusam upati divyam." In other words:

"He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman himself." 6

The famous mahavakya of the Chhandoqya Upanishad, "That art thou, O svetaketu" — reverberates throughout the later Upanishads. The implied condition for the realisation of that identity is that thou must lose thine identity. One must be altogether lost in Brahman like an arrow that has completely

penetrated its target. Thus to be conscious of being absolutely
enveloped by Brahma is not an act of mere concentration of mind.
It must be the aim of the whole of our life. In all our thoughts,
words and deeds we must be conscious of the infinite. The
Upanishads say,

"Man becomes true if in this life he can apprehend God, if not,
it is the greatest calamity for him."\(^7\)

Rabindranath Tagore's conception of God is in consonance with the
Upanishadic thoughts. For example the Upanishads pray,

"I bow to God over and over again who is in fire and in the
water, who permeates the whole world, who is in the annual
crops as well in the perennial trees."\(^8\)

University Press, 1931, p. 94.

\(^8\) Nikhilananda, Swami: *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, Madras, The
Tagore also speaks of -

"The Eternal Unbroken unity of the God in herbs, forests, and bushes, in water and fire, in all the universe - with all its creatures."

The Upanishadic seers observe the eternal and all pervading spirit in every object of nature, which unites different things in one unified way. This all pervading spirit is nothing else than God. As the Isa Upanishad emphatically declares: "know that all this, whatever moves in this moving world is enveloped by God" - Isa vasyam idam sarvam. However this Absolute Reality or Brahman can only be described by saying "neti, neti" - a negative expression calling the Reality "not this, not that", for the Absolute is immutable, eternal and infinite. In the words of Plotinus, "we say what he is not, we cannot say what he is". The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (II. 8.8) states: "It is not gross, not subtle, not short, not long, not glowing, not shadow, not dark, not attached, flavourless, smell-less, eye-less, ear-less, speech-less, mind-less, breath-less, mouth-less, not-internal, not-external, consuming nothing and consumed by nothing."

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Tagore reproduces the Upanishadic idea of the "immanence of God". To him Brahman is the Supreme Reality which manifests itself in and through the finite world. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says:

"that from which these things are born, that into which they enter at their death, that is Brahman." 10

Thus Brahman is the Supreme dynamic absolute which creates and sustains the universe. Tagore similarly believes that mere appearance and disappearance of the things of the universe take place like the waves of the sea, but life which is permanent knows no decay or diminution. However though Tagore regards the Ultimate Reality as the "Supreme Man" or the "Supreme Person", he still adheres to the Upanishadic concept of "Santam, Sivam and

Advaitam". In his *The Diary of a Westward Voyage* (p. 129) he writes, "I can find no other words more befitting than this mystical formula of the three words, Shantam, Shivam and Advaitam, in the contemplation of the Infinite ..." It may therefore be said that there is an interesting blend, in Tagore's mysticism, of the Upanishadic concept of divine immanence with the Vaishnava concept of personal Supreme Being. R.C. Zachner rightly observes:

"Rabindranath Tagore, though he was city-bred and English-educated, owed much to his father Devendranath. From him he inherited a mysticism that was neither Advaita nor yet Bhakti, but a subtle combination of the two ...".11

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* defines Brahman as *Satyam, Jnanam, Anantam* - Being, Intelligence and Bliss. Tagore follows this Upanishadic conception of Brahman. (It is beauty and goodness.) Brahman is *Satyasya Satyam*, the Reality of the Real, the source of all existing things. The cardinal truth, however, of the *Upanishads* is *Atmanam Buddhi* (know thyself). And this truth that the highest knowledge is the realization of the self is made

explicit in the following four mahavyayas:

i) Tat Tuam Asi of the Chhandogya Upanishad of the Sama Veda.

ii) Ayam Atma Brahma of the Mandukya Upanishad of the Atharva Veda.

iii) Aham Brahmasmi of the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad of the Yajur Veda.

iv) Prajnanam Brahma of the Aitareya Upanishad of the Rig Veda.

Tagore too regards self-realisation or a merger with the divine spirit, to be the highest aim of moral life. That is why the theme of a spiritual quest is recurrent in his poetry. This conception of the ultimate union with God is similar to the Buddhist conception of Nirvana. According to Tagore, the world of Nature is not an illusion but a medium for achieving oneness with the Infinite. The doctrine of oneness of all creation is, in fact, a part and parcel of Hinduism. For example, the text of our everyday meditation is the Gayatri, a verse which is considered to be the epitome, a compendium of all the four Vedas. With its assistance one tries to realise the essential unity of the world with the conscious soul of man. One learns to perceive the unity held together by the One Eternal Spirit, whose power creates the
earth, the sky and the stars and at the same time illumines our minds with the light of a consciousness that moves and exists in an unbroken continuity with the outer world. Tagore’s philosophy reconciles the opposites of the body and the soul. He advocates a co-existence, a harmony between illusion and reality, death and life, evil and good, imperfection and perfection. The following lines from the Gitanjali contains an expression of Tagore’s mystical belief in the infinite which is present in the finite and is yet apart from it:

"Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows? They push thee and pass thee by on the dusty road, taking thee for nought. I wait here weary hours spreading my offerings for thee, while passers by come and take my flowers one by one, and my basket is nearly empty. Oh, how indeed, could I tell them that for thee I wait and that thou hast promised to come. How could I utter for shame that I keep for my dowry this poverty. Ah, I hug this pride in the secret of my heart."

(Gitanjali, XLI, pp. 23-24)
IV

Tagore’s poems also depict the great influence of the Bhagavad Gita. Tagore’s conception of God can be traced to the supreme person in the Bhagavad Gita, Purushottama. Purushottama in the Gita is beyond the "kshara" - perishable and the "akshara" - imperishable. He is beyond all qualities and is the divine self. This Purushottama is the supreme "Purusa", who pervades this universe. He is the "Isvara" existing in the hearts of all beings, the immanent spirit which controls and guides everything in this universe. Tagore discovers God within the life of man. Not only human beings, but every object of nature is a manifestation of the Supreme Being. Thus, salvation consists in the integral divine perfection of the whole being of man. And this fundamental belief in the spiritual unity of things and the existence of kinship and affinities between seemingly diverse and fragmentary things in the universe, is the keynote of Indian mysticism.

To see one changeless life in all that lives
And in the separate, one inseparable.

- Bhagavad Gita
All things about us—the sprouting corn, the changing face of
the skies, the bird, the child—are but different forms of the
One inseparable. That unity is never broken. Death itself is
powerless to create a chasm in the field of reality. Tagore's
conception of the reality of the soul and the world is based on
the thoughts of the Bhagavad Gita. In the Gita, the world and the
plurality of souls are manifestations of the Purushottama. Sri
Krishna says, "This is my lower nature. Know my other and higher
nature which is the soul, by which this world is upheld, O mighty
armed." Tagore's idea of unity of the world, soul and God is also
a derivation from the Bhagavad Gita.

Apart from the influence of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the
Bhagavad Gita, on the mind of Tagore, his poems also reveal the
influence of the Vaishnava poets, who love God as a child loves
its mother, or a lover loves his beloved. In fact, Tagore was
deeply influenced by the spirit of Vaishnava mysticism. In his
autobiography, he tells us that he read the Vaishnava lyrics;

"with eager curiosity" and "went deeper and deeper in the
unexplored regions of his treasure-house." 12

He further says:

"If you ask me what gave me boldness, when I was young, I should say that one thing was my early acquaintance with the old Vaishnava poems of Bengal, full of freedom of metre and courage of expression." 13

Dr. S.N. Das Gupta writes:

"... very often we find in Rabindranath's poetry a reflection of Vaishnava poets, and in his romantic description of love we get glimpses of what Jayadeva, Vidyapathi and Chandidas must have felt." 14

One of the most pleasant and persistent ideas in Vaishnavism is that of the possibility of transforming human love into divine love. In Vaishnava mysticism love (bhava) is said to be of eleven kinds — "Patta", "Lalita", "Dalita", "Milita", "Kalita", "Chalita", "Calita", "Kranta", "Viharta", "Galita" and "Samtrpta". The "Galita" love represents a state of mystical ecstasy (divyanumad) in which the lover passes through a series of bodily and mental changes somewhat like mahabhava. Kabirdas says:

"If there be lust, how can love be there? Where there is love, there is no lust." 15

The first principle of Vaishnavism is that everything is God and that all our actions should be dedicated to Him. Tagore expresses his indebtedness to Vaishnavism thus:

"Fortunately for me a collection of old lyrical poems composed by the poets of the Vaishnava sect came to my hand when I was young. I became aware of some underlying idea in the obvious meaning of these poems." 16

The eternal love between Radha and Krishna left a deep impression on Tagore's mind. Tagore felt that in his love for nature, beauty, music etc., experiences the divine love. The love of Radha for Krishna represents the finite individual's eternal love for the Supreme Divine Being. He says,

They sang of a love that ever flows through numerous obstacles between men and Man the Divine, the eternal relation which has the relationship of mutual dependence for a fulfilment that needs perfect union of individual and the universal. 17

17. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
This spirit of love which Tagore gets from the Vaishnavas is further strengthened by the songs of the Bauls, the teachings of Kabira and the Sufi poets. As in Vaishnavism and Sufism, the relation between the finite and the infinite is mainly represented in Tagore's mysticism in terms of the Beloved and the lover. He says:

"The sadness of my soul is her bride's veil. It wants to be lifted in the night."18

Tagore was also influenced by Buddha much more than any other philosopher or saint. In his personal life Tagore lent his support to the Brahmo Samaj and dived deep into the Upanishads but in his ethical works one finds the influence of Buddhism more pronounced than in his theory of Reality. In fact, Edmond Holmes says:

"The ethics of Buddhism has to be affiliated to the metaphysics of the Upanishads."19


Tagore's monumental poems have two distinct imprints. His works have been mainly influenced by the *Upanishads* and the teachings of Buddha. The teachings of Buddhism Tagore insists must be utilized:

"to cultivate moral power to the highest extent, to know that our field of activities is not bound to the plane of our narrow self. This is also the vision of the Heavenly kingdom of Christ."20

Tagore adored Buddha because Buddha's idea of the infinite was not the idea of a spirit of an unbounded cosmic activity but the infinite whose meaning is in the positive ideal of goodness and love, which cannot be otherwise than human. This lofty idea had its expression in the teachings of Sri Ramkrishna Paramahansa and his illustrious disciple Swami Vivekananda who found "Shiva" - Truth and Beauty personified - in every "jeeva" - creature. In his *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, Swami Vivekananda said:

"Look upon every man, woman and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone; you can only serve; serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord himself, if you have the privilege ... Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you when others had it not. Do it only as a worship, I should see God in the poor, and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them."21

20. Ibid., p. ix.

He further says:

"These are His manifold forms before thee. Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God? Who loves all beings, without distinction. He indeed is worshipping best his God." 22

Tagore found "Salvation" not in any sort of renunciation. He preferred and recommended service to humanity as a better source of salvation. Buddha's teaching speaks of Nirvana as the highest achievement possible. To understand its real character, observes Tagore in his Religion of Man.

"one has to know the path of its attainment, which is not merely through the negation of evil thoughts and deeds but through the elimination of a limited love. It must mean the sublimation of the self, in a truth which is (pure) love itself, which unites in its bosom all those to whom we must offer our sympathy and service." 23

However, Tagore does not see in Buddhism a call for the annihilation of the human personality. In his essay on the

The problem of the Self he compares the deliverance of Buddhism


with that of Christianity. Thus salvation is not freedom from action but from untruth and ignorance. It is freedom from the thraldom of **Avidya**, the ignorance that darkens our consciousness and tends to limit it within the boundaries of our narrow personal self. **Avidya** is a spiritual sleep, in which man knows not the reality of his own soul. When he attains **Buddhi**, that is, the awakenment from the sleep of self to the perfection of consciousness, he becomes **Buddha**.

**Tagore**, whose father was one of the greatest leaders of the **Brahmo-Samaj**, was influenced also by the teachings of the Samaj. Like the Brahmos, Tagore had criticized the worship of idols. He says, "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! ... Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!" ([Gitanjali, XI, p.6.](#)). Tagore further continues in the same strain,

"It was through an idiosyncrasy of my temperament that I refused to accept any religious teaching merely because people in my surroundings believed it to be true." 24

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Kabira says,

"O Servant, where dost thou seek Me? Lo! I am beside thee. I am neither in temple nor in mosque : I am neither in Kaaba or Kailash." 25

Tagore therefore forbade the worship of idols in the premises of the Visvabharati. When Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal invited him to the celebration of Sivaji's anniversary, Rabindranath acknowledged the significance of the occasion, but said that not a stripling of the family of Devendranath would take part in an idolatrous ceremony. Ashok Kumar Jha writes:

"Like Kabir, there is a protestant element in Tagore's stand in respect of sanctioned values of the traditional religion. His admiration for Buddhism cannot be concealed. A protestant belief close enough to the traditional fold to be a worthwhile off-shoot, and yet distant enough to reject much of what is orthodox, can be seen at work in what Tagore inherits from his father. Also what comes from the Upanishads, Kabir and Raja Ram Mohan Roy may have blended into one as an influence behind Tagore's protestant zeal to by pass the demands of a stratified society and the external authority of religion." 26


In a systematic analysis of Tagore’s poems, one finds that next to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha, the thoughts that influenced him the most were the works of his unseen preceptor Kalidas. Most of his poems, essays and speeches reveal Tagore’s deep sense of gratitude to Kalidas. In his Memoirs (Jiban Smriti) Rabindranath recollects how the recitations from the Meghadut by his eldest brother, during the rainy season, attracted and impressed him. He could not follow the lines, but the words, the rhetorics, left a permanent imprint in his mind. Later on he got hold of a copy of Kumar Sambhava and recited some verses himself. The western biographer of Rabindranath, Prof. Thomson, also gives a similar story about the poet’s early childhood and the influence of Kalidas. He writes:

“As stray lines from the Gita Govinda (by Jaidev) or the Cloud Messenger (Meghadut by Kalidas) fell on the child’s hearing, imagination could take of the things that had been seen and by them conjure up the Sanskrit poet’s picture.”

Rabindranath had started composing verses at a very early age. He had written about 7000 lines of verse before he was eighteen. Consciously or sub-consciously the influence of the master-poet Kalidas was there throughout Tagore's literary career. He drew his inspiration from Kalidas as Dante had drawn from Virgil or Spenser from Chaucer. In the words of Prof. Thomson,

"As Dante looked across the centuries and hailed Virgil as his master, as Spenser overlooked two hundred years of poetical fumbling and claimed the succession to Chaucer, as Milton in his turn saluted his 'master' Spenser, so Rabindranath turned back to Kalidas."28

Traces of Christian theism are also distinctly manifest in Tagore's poems. He compares many of the features of Vaishnava religion with the freshness of early Christianity. He observes that both are intensely humanistic. He says,

"Nobody exalted man more, in every sphere, than Christ has done."29

28. Ibid., p. 54.
The divinity of man is stressed as much by Jesus as by the Vaishnava saints. Tagore sees in Christianity a:

"message of the friendly union between God and man."30

Jesus said "so-ham" - I and my father are one. In the light of love for all, he realised his unity with the supreme Man. It has therefore been said that the God of the Gitanjali is a "Christ-like God."31

But the greatest influence of all, the influence of the scriptures, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, was the foremost on the mind of Tagore. Explaining this influence Tagore himself writes,

"the scenery which appears to bring back to us the past of India is the forest, it is this which inspires our classical literature, which still haunts our minds. The legends of our great epic poets have grown in the shadow of the Indian forests and two of our great classical dramas of which the theme is love - love which separates and love which reunites - have for their stage the sylvan hermitage."32

30. Ibid., p. 52.

31. Quoted by S. Radhakrishnan from Rev. Saunders in Indian Philosophy, op. cit., p. 94.

32. Bhattacharya, Dr. Vivek R.: Relevance of Tagore, Delhi, New Book Society of India, 1979, p. 32.
Thus for Rabindranath God is immanent in nature. The immanence of God has to be realised in the objects of nature. The tempest and the ocean, the sun and the moon, the hills and the rivers, are the outbursts of divine Reality. As the romantics beautifully put it:

One impulse from the vernal wood
Can teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good
Then all the sages can.

Tagore finds companionship in the brotherhood of trees and is elated at the whispers of forests, rivers, stars, rocks and the blue hills. The supreme spirit is present everywhere, in every blade of grass or atom of dust. Every flower is a symbol of worship, every forest a temple and every hill top God’s own dwelling place. The sound of running streams, the rustle of the reaped corn, and the songs of the birds are hymns of praise to God. God’s silent steps are heard in the forests paths, and the golden touch of His feet is in the light of the dawn and the joy of our hearts. The relation of man to nature, according to Tagore, is one of interdependence. God creates nature and man in
and through whom He manifests Himself.

"O Nature. So long as I did not love you, Your light, failed to find its wealth." 33

In Vasundhara, the poet addresses nature, saying that in him, night and day, the flowers of nature bloom, in him have nature’s seed sprouted and for him do the trees shower their perfume and foliage. So nature’s flowers look up to us and the sun seeks its reflection in the human face. Without man nature would be like a "broken arch," "a circle unclosed". Every object of nature gazes into our eyes in order that we might make it our own.

Thus it is clear from the mentioned influences that as a poet, Tagore sets for himself a definite objective, that is, to sing about the tremendous mystical experiences of the sages; these experiences which have no rational claims, and cannot be logically understood have an irresistible appeal for him essentially because of the unique similarity between the

sensibility of the ancient sages and that of the poet who acknowledges that -

"in the depth of my consciousness rings the cry I want thee, only thee."

(Gitanjali, XXXVIII, p.22).

Tagore is a pure poet for he blends the tenets of the old and the new schools of the oriental and the western philosophies in such a fashion that his utterances finally remain the presentation of his own "state of consciousness" to use William James' words, in which free association of ideas form the kaleidoscopic designs of the innumerable possibilities of "becoming" of the finite man. The very first line of Gitanjali, "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure", reveals two things: that there is an infinite power which has a perennial desire of making the finite and that there is an urge of self-exceeding, a sense of becoming something "more" by evolving inwardly. In fact, Tagore's mystical values, are entirely different from that of Whitman, Yeats or Eliot, who depend either on the conceptual thoughts or on the theological dogmas. On the contrary Tagore's songs derive their
sustenance and substance from the emotional experiences of one
whose soul yearns to feel intuitively the "Soul of Existence"
through love and faith in this world's festival. His conception
of God is therefore two fold:

i) First of all he holds that God is beyond the human self and
    the entire universe. He says,

    "The positive aspect of the infinite is in "advaitam", in an
    absolute unity in which comprehension of the multitude is
    not as in an outer receptacle but as in an inner perfection
    that permeates and exceeds its contents, like the beauty in
    a lotus which is ineffably more than all the constituents
    of the flower." 34

ii) Secondly, in its immanent aspect, God stands at the very
centre of the human heart. Tagore holds that God is perfect and
benevolent. He possesses all the metaphysical, moral and causal
attributes and a perfect knowledge of all things - past, present
and future.

Although Rabindranath Tagore was influenced deeply by the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Vaishnavism, Buddhistic thought and Christianity, he never belonged to any system of thought or religion. He never defines his religion, and was vehemently against strict dogmas and rituals. His religious ideas do not spring from any theological groove but blooms forth in the poetry of life. Tagore writes:

HE it is, the innermost one, who awakens my being with his deep hidden touches.

He it is who puts his enchantment upon these eyes and joyfully plays on the chords of my heart in varied cadence of pleasure and pain.

He it is who weaves the web of this maya in evanescent hues of cold and silver, blue and green, and lets peep out through the folds his feet, at whose touch I forget myself.

(Gitanjali, LXXII, p.48)
Tagore's concept of religion is the outcome of some deep realisation of unity that he felt with the life and nature around him. Its manifestation, therefore, has seldom been through any set theological dogma or critical metaphysics. He explicitates it through his poetry:

"My religion is essentially a poet's religion: its touch comes to me through the same unseen trackless channel as does the inspiration of my music. My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life; somehow they are wedded to each other and though their betrothal had a long period of ceremony it was kept a secret from me. Then came suddenly a day when their union was revealed to me." 35

The main difference between certain schools of Indian metaphysics and Tagore's realisation is that he felt the process and purpose that are unfolding through the phenomenal manifestations as a necessary aspect of the movement and expression of the Infinite: 'I am searching for the Unknown through the known.' This appears to agree with the maxim in the Bible:

"He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen ... he who loves God should love his brother too." 36

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It was not appealing to Tagore that in the attainment of the
Infinite the finite ought to be rejected. He was not satisfied
with subjective meditation but wanted to realise the Creator in
His creations. Tagore writes:

We know the Infinite in the person we love. To me love is
only a name for that particular feeling of realizing the
limitless in the finite persons. When the mother finds no
limit to her child, when her heart revolves round that small
fragment of humanity and still cannot grasp it completely,
we know that the mother is worshipping her God in her
child.37

Tagore finds a meaning, a purpose in his existence on earth. And
he says that there is a purpose, an aim for the life that is
endowed to each one of us in our sojourn at earth:

Born in this universe full of infinite mystery we cannot
accept our existence as a momentary outburst of chance,
drifting on the current of matter towards an eternal
nowhere! We cannot look upon our lives as dreams of a
dreamer who has no awakening in all time. We have a
personality to which matter and force are moving unless
related to something infinitely personal, whose nature we
have discovered in some measure in human love, in the
greatness of the good, in the martyrdom of the heroic soul,
in the ineffable beauty of nature, which can never be a more
physical fact but an expression of Personality.38

37. Quoted by Maitraye Devi from Rabindranath Tagore, op.cit.,
p.5.

Tagore in his conception of man elevates him to a higher level granting him the revelation of the Infinite. The mind of man possesses the possibility of carrying him far beyond the material and physical interests. This Man has comfort and faith in the spirit of sacrifice for others because he has faith in the existence of a universal human spirit and he knows himself to be a part of a great Spirit, from which if his existence is separated, his individual self entirely loses its significance. Tagore writes:

Religion inevitably concentrates itself on humanity which illumines our reason, inspires our wisdom, stimulates our love and claims our intelligent service. And this God which pulsates in us, through all humanity and through all universe, by our participation in their essence, cannot be a God of duality, a personal God who is different from me; but it is the God who is the essence of my being.

Another aspect of Tagore's religion is that it is universal in nature. It is not the individual man who alone is saved, but the humanity as a whole. The poet's voice addresses all humanity and
arouses the spirit of man, thereby bringing release to the minds that are in the meshes of materialism:

It is one of the distinctive marks of Rabindranath's view of life that he looks upon the Supreme Person as comprehending the individual and the universe, and the Supreme Person manifests Himself in those yearnings of the individual which connect him with the larger world lying beyond ... The Lord of the poet's life shades off into the Lord of the universe.40

Giving a description of God Tagore writes:

Whatever name may have been given to the divine reality it has found its highest place in the history owing to the human character giving meaning to the idea of sin and sanctity and offering an eternal background to all ideals of perfection which have their harmony in man's own nature.41

He continues in the same strain:

When I try to get a larger vision of this world with all its constant activity, I find that it is ever unwearyed, peaceful and beautiful. Through so much movement and endeavour, through the cycle of life and death, joy and sorrow, it does not seem over burdened ... How is it possible for peace and beauty to reside in the midst of such diversity and striving? Why is it that all this is not just noise but there is music in it? The only possible answer is, there He stands silent like a tree.42

God is knowledge, but He cannot be known as the things of the world. Tagore says:

The vision of the Supreme One is a direct and immediate intuition, not based on any ratiocination or demonstration.43

For God is with us, but we wrongly search for Him in the world:

To see God we should transfer ourselves to another dimension of reality. We should break down the barrier of individuality and relax the despotism of the sense ... We escape from the darkness of separation and see God as the transcendent light in which the whole universe is bathed.44

Man's religious aspiration fulfils itself in his communion with a personal God. He seeks for a God who is a person like his own self, one within whom he may live, and have his being. However, Tagore does not reject altogether the impersonal aspect of the Absolute. While maintaining that Reality is essentially personal, he never claims that the idea of personality exhausts the


44. Ibid., p. 16.
description of the Absolute. Tagore writes:

Personality is only one aspect of the Reality, though it is the most important one.45

According to Shankaracharya, the exponent of the philosophy of Advaita, Brahman or the Supreme Reality is devoid of all qualities. But Ramanujacharya differs from Shankaracharya radically in stating that Brahman or the Supreme Reality is full of infinite auspicious qualities—Anantakalyanaquna paripurna. Tagore’s philosophy appears to be in consonance with Ramanuja’s view, although he never rejects the Nirguna view of Shankara.

To Ramanuja Brahman. Sriman Narayana and Reality are one and the same, but Shankara makes a distinction between Brahman and Iswara. Brahman perse is devoid of all qualities whatsoever. But in order to bless the devotees, Brahman associates Himself with suddhasattva maya and assumes forms such as Sriman Narayana, Rama, Krishna, Sai, etc. He believes in only one fundamental principle of the universe namely Brahman and that is why his philosophy is

45. Quoted by A.K. Srivastava from Rabindranath Tagore: Santiniketan., op. cit., p. 36.
said to be monism, whereas Ramanuja's philosophy is called
monotheism because he believes in only one God namely Sriman
Narayana. In other words, Shankara's philosophy is Absolutistic;
Ramanuja's theistic.

Taore says that the Nirguna and the Saguna should be regarded as
only the two aspects of God, the latter, however, being a more
satisfactory aspect for our religious requirements:

There is a mighty discussion going on about the question
whether God is personal or impersonal, whether he has
qualities or is qualityless, whether or not forms can be
attributed to him. But in love 'yea' and 'nay' are held
together. Love has Nirguna at one end and Saguna at the
other end.46

Taore, the mystic found the Invisible through the visible and he
was one with both:

As I look around the world
A memory comes to life
I seem to find in everything
The union of you and me in limitless forms.47

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46. Quoted by A.K. Srivastava from Rabindranath Taore : 
Samanjasyas.. op.cit., p. 36.

Tagore thus realises the real spirit of the *Upanishads*, which conceive *Brahman* not only as the pure ground of all reality and consciousness, but also as the ultimate source of all joy. Worldly pleasures are only the distorted fragments of that joy, just as worldly objects are limited manifestations of that Reality. One who can dive into the deepest recesses of his *self*, not only realises his identity with *Brahman* but gets to the heart of Infinite joy. The more one gives up his hankering for objects and tries to realize his identity with the true self (*Atman*) or God (*Brahman*), the more does one realize true happiness. To feel at one with the self is to be one with the infinite God, the immortal and infinite joy. Nothing then remains unattained, nothing left to be desired. The *Katha Upanishad* declares:

A mortal attains immortality and unity with *Brahman* even here, in this very life, when his heart is free from all desires.48

Tagore's philosophy is thus based on the foundations of life. Death is not a negation of life but it is the gateway through which life constantly renews itself.