THE TWIN MYSTERIES

Of all subjects, life and death engage man’s interest most, simply because they are intertwined, twin mysteries to man and with their nature of abstraction and complexity, they always baffle man. Unlike a beast, man is blessed with thinking faculty. Not satisfied with the beastly existence, man struggles to comprehend the world around him with his intellect. As a significant part of his intellectual growth, he endeavours to look beyond his existence and the mundane world to discover eternal truths about himself and the world hidden from his mortal eyes. With metaphysical unrest and spiritual thirst, he embarks on the perennial quest for his self-discovery. In his ceaseless endeavours, man from ancient times to modern time confronts, The eternal questions “what’s life? What’s death?” that torture man constantly and offer no concrete, tangible answers and ever challenge his intellect despite the immense scientific and technological advancement. However, man continues to struggle to unravel these twin cosmic mysteries and to capture the whole truth about life and death.

The men in the East, especially from India and the men of the West especially from America, look at and examine these cosmic riddles. Their contemplation of “life and death” is deeply steeped in their culture and heritage. To the westerner, life is all flesh and is meant to be enjoyed as long as it lasts. To him, death is the cessation
of life and an end to all pleasures life offers man. Death is dreadful, as it robs man of “all his enjoyments and pleasures”. The westerners view life as unmitigated joys and death as an obscure, dark dread as their conception of life is wholly hedonistic. So their literature invariably reflects the epicurean attitude to life and negative and dark outlook of death.

The Indian outlook is that of the Hindu. To the Indian – Hindu, life is not all pleasures and fulfillment of fleshy desires, though pleasures have their own vital part to play in his life, life being something beyond the physical, making him aware of “the spirit”. Life never ends, but goes on forever. With the disintegration of the body, what is destroyed is only physical life, but not the life eternal of the spirit. It is this spirituality that lends true meaning, significance and illumination to the outlook of the Hindu towards life.

The Hindu in a similar fashion perceives death in a different prespective. To him, death is not something horrible to be afraid of and not a gloomy, formidable monster that puts an end to all the joys
of life. It is viewed as an ultimate truth that every human being born into this world inevitably realizes. Death spells extinction to the physical existence of human body, but not to the life eternal of the spirit. It is just an invisible agent that helps the transmigration of the soul from one body to another one. The Hindu never looks down upon death as a negative, dark and destructive force, but as a positive, bright and creative force. The spiritual elevates the Hindu view of death to a higher plane. The Hindu is always concerned with the life and evolution of human soul and the merger of Atma (individual soul) - with Paramatama. (The universal soul) - the realization of man’s ultimate destiny. The Hindu conception of life and death is immensely and solely influenced and moulded by religion which plays a very significant role in his life and reflects Indian culture.

About Indian Culture that manifests Indian outlook of life and death, the eminent Indian English poet and critic, Sitakant Mahapatra observes:

Indian culture is thus life - denying and life - affirming at one and the same time. This was one could notice the duality implicit in almost all aspects of the approach to life and reality; pleasure and pain, good and evil, life and death, virtue and vice, heaven and hell.\(^1\).
Sitakant Mahapatra continues to observe about the vision of the men of literature to life and death:

True, no literature of a people or philosophical vision but it is the later which shapes the approach to reality, the approach to life, death and time and therefore, structure the literary imagination and literary vision.

But the westerner, either in his outlook of life or of death is primarily concerned with human body. To him, life appears to be transitory. Life eternal of human soul and realization of man’s ultimate destiny, is quite alien to him. The westerner’s view of life and death is shaped mostly by science and technology which promotes materialism. With his hedonistic approach to life he keeps pursuing the physical and the materialistic while the Hindu endeavours to realize his ultimate destiny, living up to Swami Vivekananda’s wise dictum, “India is a Karma Bhoomi (Land of destiny) and America is a Bhoga bhoomi (Land of pleasure)”. This transparent and conspicuous difference in outlook to life and death between the Indian-Hindu and the American reflect their cultures and heritages respectively. Their poetry dwelling on the twin subjects of life and death testifies to this fact.
Seized with the twin, eternal and metaphysical subjects of life and death, the western and Indian poets attempt to explore and unravel these two cosmic mysteries under the impact of their respective cultures and heritages. While most of the western poets present in their poetry, more or less the same conception of life and death, Indian poets are apparently divided in their view and presentation of life and death in their poetry. Instead of near uniformity, a sharp contrast is discernible in their exploration and treatment. One school of Indian English Poets like Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and other poets deeply rooted in Hindu culture and heritage stuck to Hindu conception of life and death. Another school with Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and others, thoroughly westernized, chose to present the western view of life and death.

Harindranath who belongs to the school of Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore toes the line of these Master seer-poets in his conception, exploration, treatment and presentation of these twin subjects. He studies, explores and unravels these mysteries from an Indian perspective of Hindu culture and heritage, free from the impact of western culture.
“Life and death”, the twin subjects Harindranath is obsessed with, recur in his poetry. Quite amazingly, every time he dwells upon these subjects, he unveils a novel vision. As a deep thinker, an untiring explorer and as a mystic, the poet glows through each vision he unveils, blending the spiritual and the metaphysical with the earthly. Therein lies his supreme power of penetrating vision and his masterly skill.

In his metaphysical quest, he questions about life and death that appear to be illusions, weaving magical pattern that always misleads man, delineating life as a shifting, altering, colourful pattern of illusions with its desires, dreams and hopes. Through the most striking image of Kaleidoscope, Harindranath ponders over life:

Before the eyes what patterns shift and pass,
Arrange and unarrange;
Cubes, circles, squares, logenges, sheer dope
Of the same few bits of unimpressive glass
Creating apparent miracles of change:
Desire, dream and hope
In futile repetition luring the eyes,
Each pattern a surprise,
Intoxicating sight,
Life, the intriguing dark Kaleidoscope,
When viewed by ignorance against the light.³

Life never remains the same. With its amazing, alluring, Kaleidoscopic patterns executed by human desires, dreams and hopes, it keeps changing, intoxicating and luring man’s eyes. The poet questions and realizes, “What is life, what is death? / Figments of unreality, the magical pattern of festival”⁴

The magical pattern of this festival colours blinds man’s vision.

Harindranath defines life as a colourful and magical illusion:

Life is a Kaleidoscope which, at every twist and turn, reveals a new pattern -- until even the variety of the permutation and combination of its hues and tints seem to cloy with a sense of monotony. Take the kaleidoscope to pieces and you will then discover that what actually created all those exquisitely alluring patterns of dreams and desires were only rough bits of coloured glass of no value at all - - bits to be thrown away and forgotten⁵

The image of the kaleidoscope shows the eternal truth that life is a colourful, magical and misleading illusion. In “Iconoclast”, Harindranath questions “where does the last breath drawn through human / nostrils go to? does it wander / across air; across layer upon layer of / ascending vacancy?”⁶
About the illusion created by life, Harindranath questions again, “Is a whole life time, then, but a series of masks / worn for brief carnivals by the great / masquerader, sleep?”7. The poet realizes that life is nothing but sleep that wears a series of masks for brief spells. Here, sleep is none other than death. All pleasures that life offers to man are just repeated accidents and they are all momentary. Life is a series of illusions. It always wears the masks of reality. Illusion performs on “a make-shift and make-believe stage”. With the realization of truth dawning over his psyche, the poet chants, “yet life continues on the surface/ masked as reality”./ In truth, illusion performing / on a make shift, make-believe stage”8

Again, the poet views life from a different perspective and discovers that it is all a drama. All men and women are actors. They appear on the stage of the world, play different roles assigned to them and disappear from the stage. This is how William Shakespeare describes man’s life in As you like it. Harindranath too in a Shakespearean fashion depicts man as an actor, a tinsel-hero, wearing different costumes, but it is ego about his role that struts about on the stage and fades out of the stage the moment the stage-lights are put out:
Upon the stage the Ego struts about,
Costumed and crowned, time’s tinsel – hearted  

But soon the coloured stage-lights hero, put out …
His total takings? The eternal zero

When man vanishes from the world’s stage, his ego is blown off, all his costumes disappear, his tinsel melts away and his heroism gets reduced to nothing. And he takes nothing alongwith him when he leaves the stage of the world and becomes the eternal zero. On the world’s stage, he is the hero and off the stage, he is the eternal zero. The apt metaphor “The Eternal Zero” used by the poet conveys the worthlessness and nothingness of life. The essential concept of the Hindu Philosophy is highlighted here. The same view of life is echoed in the poem “The Drama”. To the poet, life is a Panorama and an unending drama. But it is not just the drama in which men and women perform their roles as actors and it is the drama of love’s soaring thirst. The poet muses over life:

O what a panorama
Of life is being rehearsed
In this unending drama
Of love’s ascending thirst.  

It is the drama of love undying and growing with unquenchable thirst.
Harindranath always looks upon life as a journey that continues for ever and never ends. Even death is only the beginning of a new journey as it does not terminate life and is not a negation of life. Death marks just a change along the line of imperishability. The poet articulates this view of his in his autobiography “Life and Myself”:

Death is one of the most tricky words coined by man. It signifies darkness and mystery and a leap into the unpredictable; it even suggests extinction to many. But what it should mean to us is change along the line of imperishability.\textsuperscript{11}

Life never ends. Death spells no break or extinction of life. The poet voices his firm belief in the continuity of life and his wholly optimistic view of death in his autobiography: “Life and Myself”, a conviction he articulates repeatedly in his poems:

… Life, all life, is only a point in a spiral which returns again and again, each time, on a slightly higher level; and that death is neither a break nor an extinction.\textsuperscript{12}

About this eternal journey of life, Harindranath sings, “Life is a journey, / Death is not the end of the journey / But the beginning of a new journey”\textsuperscript{13}

But the human soul keeps making many journeys – the journeys that are ancient and eternal. Though the journey of each
life is short, the journey never ends and it ever continues. Focusing on the short journey of life and the ancient, eternal journeys of human soul, the poet proclaims, “I have done many journeys / of life and death/ The journey of life is brief / And yet not, sense it is continuity / of the last journey”.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, the poet stresses the truth about the eternal journey of the human soul from one life to another.

In “Reflections” The poet records “Life’s last moment said to man at his very inception. I am the sum total of every life time. Do not mistake me for a full stop. Accounts closed in one book, another is opened and the process of debit and credit continues”.\textsuperscript{15}

This view of life as a series of continuous and eternal journeys invariably brings into focus, the subject of rebirth as emphasized in \textbf{The Gita} and assimilated by every Hindu. Harindranath believes that life as a series of journeys ever goes on. He opines “Life never passes away from life; it only keeps on passing into life. Death is the subtlest technique life uses in the expression of its manifoldness”.\textsuperscript{16}
In the poem “questioning” the poet possessed by metaphysical quest about life and death, reflects over what happens to man after death and what death exactly is. Through a chain of curious queries, he confronts death as “an act of shedding of the soul, vanishing of the soul, vast eternal blank, sea of nothingness and sleep”. However, the poet believes that death does not end life and with death, the soul awakens into a new life. The poet questions and hopes:

“when we are dead, who knows what we shall be; / we may become branches of a tree; / wind, or white lotus balanced on a stream; / soft evening-haze; a cloud; a peasant’s dream/…/cattle or courtyard spread with golden grain”

Man may be reborn as a tree or a white lotus or an infant or cattle. Here, Harindranath echoes the Hindu religious doctrine of rebirth that declares, “man is born to die and man dies to be born again”. So life should be realized as a continuous process and there is no end to this process. It is just coming onto the stage to perform and going off the stage as soon as the performance ends. And it is
all a process of coming and going. The poet reveals this secret of human existence in the following lines:

All is a process of coming and going, going and coming
Laughter and tears, tears and laughter
Living and dying, dying and living,
Had not this been the secret of existence\(^\text{18}\)

In this eternal process of coming and going, laughter and tears are repeated by each other. Elaborating this idea about the continuity and eternality of man’s life, the poet writes:

Death is only link in the endless chain of the continuum of unobliteratable existence within the framework of time and space which again is held in the framework of timelessness and unlimitedness.\(^\text{19}\)

Fortifying this idea once again, he pens, “Death after death causes life to live life after life”\(^\text{20}\). Looking at life from a different perspective, the poet sings, “what we call life is only a lonely interim/between a birth and dying”\(^\text{21}\). This is indeed a unique and surprising view of life. Dwelling on the idea, he employs the simile of a “ferry” for life, that conveys the idea that between shores of birth and death, life moves like a ferry. The poet chants:
“Our life like a ferry, keeps plying / between a birth and a
dying / which, in spite of all resistance, is forced to go with the
tide”.  

A similar idea is expressed when Harindranath says, “Birth
and death are the two ends of the tunnel of life”. 

The poet visualizes life as a painted pastime between a birth
and a death and man alone plays this painted pastime,” And what is
life if not / a painted pastime / Man spends alone between a birth
/And a death”  

The poet is intrigued by the mystery of life. A mingled web
of joys and sorrows, life is ever veiled in mystery and through the
fascinating image of bride, the poet attempts to capture the mystery
and uncertainty of life in the poem “The beautiful Bride”:

Life stood behind her embroidered curtain
Inscrutable and apart,
With a crown of thorns upon her head
Relieved by occasional roses, red
As the blood of the heart;
Life stood behind her embroidered curtain:
“I am not fickle but most uncertain”
Was what she said.  

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Life as the bride standing behind the embroidered curtain is a mystery that teases man’s mind with its uncertainty and unknowability. The crown of thorns the bride of life carries on her head symbolises the sufferings, pains, agonies that it offers man. Occasional red roses the bride of life offers man are only occasional joys that man receives from the hands of the bride of life. Here, the apt image brings out not only the mystery of life, but joys and sorrows hidden in life.

Life, despite all its mystery and uncertainty, holds in its grasp, death - its ultimate truth. This is well conveyed in the following lines: “Life shall hold truth in its grasp until it choke / while death may only be invited / perpetually to cocktail parties / where drunkenness will lead to its gateway”26. The gateway of life is death and life has to reach this gateway and pass through it.

However, to Harindranath, life and death are the single process of shutting and opening of the door and it is an eternal process. The door opens to the tomb and the door shuts to reveal the womb. He reflects:
The secret of shutting and opening, opening and
shutting, tomb, a sealed eyelid opening
to reveal the eye of the womb

Harindranath seems to convey that within life lies hidden
death and death leads to life and it is an interesting mysterious
cosmic process that ever goes on.

Man is no doubt a masterpiece of the creator in His creation
with all the supreme boons granted to him by God out of divine
grace. But the poet’s depiction of man is quite a contradiction to this
familiar conception of man. To him, man is the masterpiece of pain,
a creature caught up in the web of light and shadow and “a
conceited plaything of experience”. The poet in the poem “Man”
sings of this fact of man’s life. “And man, the master piece of
pain, is wrought/ Momently, a creature light- and- shadow shot, /
conceited plaything of experience”
The life of man as projected by the poet is made up of light and shadow, tears and laughters, beauty and ugliness, birth and death. In “Song”, consoling his heart for the sorrow of the day, he hopes, “A golden streak will displace the/streak of grey/tomorrow”\textsuperscript{29} and calls for “equipoise” towards joys and sorrows of life, the profound message of the Gita and the kernel of Karmayoga. And the poet paints life as “passing strange/ pantomime of death and birth, sorrow and joy / and change/ and time,”\textsuperscript{30} and asks men to experience “the strange mixed pantomime of life “with high equipoise like the grass. Man must learn equanimity and must grow into a stoic in his attitude to life.

Life is not all joy. Life also brings griefs that often tend to threaten life. When they strike man, man breaks down with terrible frustration and life becomes a nightmare. Out of such horrible disappointments many grief-stricken people go to the extreme extent of ending their precious lives. Life is not meant to be ended. Life is to be lived fully, purposefully and meaningfully. Man, when stricken by griefs, should remain optimistic and view life positively. In one of his beautiful lyrics “lyric of optimism”, Harindranath shows how to overcome griefs and look at positive side of life and enjoy life with optimistic out look, underlying the fact that life is brief.
Harindranath inspires the reader with his optimistic utterances, singing of beauty and joys of life:

Let not grief
or hurt embitter
Life which is so very brief;
Can’t you see the glad sun glitter
On the leaf
And the stone?
Can’t you hear the small bird twitter
Merrily, alone?
Never be
Bruised or broken
By life’s hollow misery

Beauties of nature offer man joy and enable him to overcome “hollow miseries of life” and to have an optimistic view of life. Through this simple, well crafted and beautiful poem, Harindranath conveys “the message of optimism about life” to the reader.

In “virgin and vineyard”, a collection of poems, Harindranath looks upon life as a plaything of nature and nature’s transient bauble, and death as an incident of cessation of breath and underlines the truth that man undergoes a series of such incidents:

Nature is a mistress of myriad outlets and inlets,
Life is a plaything of Nature; her transient bauble,
“Even as the shores of the world over washed by one ocean,
So are all beings washed by one single consciousness”,
“Death is an incident; death is an incident, breathing
An incident, breath-cancellation like wise, is an incident,
Man is an incident packed with a series of incidents.\(^3\)
Man is born and dies in nature. Nature provides out-lets and
in-lets of deaths and lives of man. Through these lines, the poet
conveys the significant role played by nature in enacting life and
death for man.

Life is transitory while the soul is immortal. The body and life
with which man identifies himself is a myth in which the immortal
soul is housed. About the transience of human life and immortality
of soul, Harindranath chants in his characteristic, mystical fashion
“This body is a house of myth/ where in the self abides/ ----/ which,
when  unworthy, renders man /one with the stars and winds\(^3\)
(infinities)

Once the rhythm of the self is snapped and the myth of the
body is smashed, man’s soul mingles with the stars and winds. From celestial world descends man’s soul into body and the rhythm
of life flows till the rhythm of the self remains unwoven.
Quite aware of the transience of human body and eternity of soul, Harindranath sings:

Yet the soul in me reposes,
Quite carnival of roses,
Roses of eternal life

(Roses of Eternal Life)

While the body is made of dust, death and strife, the soul is blessed with the beauty of eternal life. The body is impermanent and the life of man is ephemeral. But the soul is immortal and indestructible. What the Gita stresses about body, life and soul is echoed in this tiny poem.

Modern man is leading a strife-torn, bare and hueless life, pursuing fatal pleasures, oblivious of the supreme. Describing modern man’s pleasure as “the dusky snake with rose-red eyes”, the poet expresses the gloom and doom of modern man’s life. “Life is a dance behind the painted veil / In the long night which never knows a dawn,/ where all who dance grow wearied and wan. (Memories).

Beauty in life, though it appears to be an alluring red fruit, is rotten within and many tragedies of life lie hidden there. This bitter
truth of life Harindranath articulates in the following lines of the poem “memories”, “Beauty, a red fruit rotten at the core; / within her breast I can behold her hide / unwritten tragedies of life inside.”

Perennially confronting the question of life, Harindranath keeps looking at life and attempts to understand and define it. To him, life is a strife with one’s own self that ultimately results in nothingness and life is realized as a mirrored nothingness. “A mirrored nothingness at strife / with its own self which men call life” (Lines on Paradox)

Deeply mystical, his soaring vision transcends the mundaneness of man’s existence and captures the spirituality of human life as the ultimate goal of man’s life. Life is not mere laughter, song, speech, weeping and silence. Though life is made of stuff, containing joys and sorrows, it moves beyond, to attain the knowledge and maturity of the divine. Viewing life as “an immortal moving pyramid” towards the divine, the poet muses “That life is more than laughter, song and speech, / weeping and sombre silence, it doth reach/ Its golden born divine maturity” (Memories)
The poet understands well the power of soul and believes firmly that the soul, quite conscious of the divine within itself, attains divine maturity to guide man to his ultimate goal of reaching the supreme. Hence, the poet states confidently “Ah, then the soul is knowledge, wide and deep” (Memories)

Harindranath in “Memories: (Strange Ways)” paints vividly the contemporary world and modern man’s life with all its murky realities, pursuits of pseudo-pleasures and futile, materialistic goals on one hand. On the other hand, the poet envisions the eternal truth about the infinite power of human soul and the immense possibilities of man’s soul attaining the realization of the divine. The poet fills the following lines with a more complex, mystical vision that reveals the profound truth and supreme beauty of life and death. “All birth is the inordinate desire of the invisible / To become visible, all death is the equally inordinate desire / of the visible to become invisible”.

The divine who is invisible, manifests Himself in man and through man, it is He who becomes visible. The life of man is the manifestation and revelation of the divine in visible, human form.
Death is not the end of life, but is, in fact, the disappearance of the divine from human body and the visible becoming invisible. The soul in man is divine and it is invisible. Through life, the soul gains visibility and through death, it turns invisible. Here, Harindranath pours out the spiritual truth about the human soul and its ultimate spiritual destination as proclaimed by the Vedas and the Upanishads and preached and practised by the Seers and Saints of India.

The poet’s mystical vision, penetrating through the mundane and traversing beyond what appears to be earthly, captures and telescopes the spiritual and eternal truth about human life. Human life is the manifestation of the divine will and the divine at its own will is patterned in various lives. The poet articulates this eternal, spiritual truth about life. “All visible life is interspun, / A pattern of the heavenly will; / We are not several, we are one”.  

(Way of ways). What is visible in myriad forms is not several and different, but it is the One invisible that is manifested in various forms and lives. It is the Upanishadic truth that is celebrated in these lines.

A profound thinker, a true poet, a seer and a prophet, Harindranath blessed with soaring, mystical vision, fertile
imagination and sound grasp of the essential, looks at life and death and sings of varied facts and perspectives of these twin-eternal mysteries. Each perspective unveiled about life and death is in fact the illumination of eternal truths.

The poet envisions life as a kaleidoscopic, colourful, varied-patterned illusion, as a drama with man performing as a tinsel hero on the world-stage, as a strange pantomime, as a ferry plying between the shores of birth and death, as an eternal process of goings and comings and shutting and opening of door, as an immortal pyramid moving towards the divine, as a dance behind a painted veil and as an inscrutable, eternal mystery. Each metaphor employed by the poet is highly fascinating, apt and evocative.

Whatever vision Harindranath unveils in his poems about life and death, the truth is that life and death are inter-linked. About the nature and value of life and death, Sitakant Mahapatra observes:

Life is sacred, it is magical, it is a miracle because it is evanescent, because it evaporates like the moment. It is only passion, a degree of pagan love of life and awareness of death that can redeem us from the evergrowing dehumanization of age. 

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References:


2. Ibid., P.71


7. Ibid.


12. Ibid., P. 158


14. Ibid., P.110


16. Ibid., P.17


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22. Ibid., P.22


30. Ibid.


33. Chattopadhyaya Harindranath, *Horizon–Ends* (Bezwada: P.R. Sons, 1948), P.34

34. Chattopadhyaya Harindranath, *Roses of eternal life* (Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University, 1978), P.113


36. Ibid.


38. Chattopadhyaya Harindranath, *Strange ways* (Pondichery: Bharatha Shaktty Nilayam, 1936), P.44

39. Ibid.

