

Chapter-XIII

Traveller of the Infinite

Rabindranath Tagore

In an age when reason was considered as highest light given to man, Tagore pointed to the vision of the mystics as always the still grater light. When man was elated with undreamt-of worldly success, puffed up with incomparable material possessions and powers, Tagore's voice rang clear and emphatic in tune with the cry of the ancients: "What shall I do with all this mass of things, if I am not made immortal by that?" When men, in their individual as well as collective egoism, were scrambling for earthly gains and hoards, he held before them vaster and cleaner horizons, higher and deeper ways of being and living to maintain the sacred sense of human solidarity, the living consciousness of the divine, one and indivisible. When the gospel of power had all but hypnotized men's minds and god-man came to be equated with the Titan, Tagore saw through the falsehood and placed in front and above all the old-world eternal verities of love and self-giving, harmony and mutuality, sweetness and light. When pessimism, cynicism, agnosticism struck the major chord of human temperament, and grief and frustration and death and decay were taken as a matter of course to be the inevitable order of

earthly life. He continued to sing the song of the *rishis* that *ananda* and immortality are the breath of things, the birthright of human beings. "When modernism declared with certitude never to be contested that matter is *brahman*, Tagore said with the voice of one who knows that spirit is *brahman*."¹

Tagore is in direct line with those bards who have sung of the spirit, who always soared high above the falsehoods and ugliness of merely mundane life and lived in the undecaying delights and beauties of a diviner consciousness. Spiritual reality was the central theme of his poetic creation: only and naturally he viewed it in a special way and endowed it with a special grace. We know of another God-intoxicated man, the Jewish philosopher Spinoza, who saw things *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the mode of eternity. Well Tagore can be said to see things, in their essential spiritual reality, under the mode of beauty. Keats indeed spoke of truth being beauty and beauty truth. But there is a great difference in the outlook and inner experience. A worshipper of beauty, unless he rises to the *Upaniṣhadic* norm, is prone to become sensuous and pagan. Keats was that, Kalidasa was that, even Shelly was not far different. The spiritual vein in all these poets remains secondary. In the old Indian master, it is part of his intellectual equipment, no doubt, but nothing much more than

that. In the other two it comes in as strange flashes from an unknown country, as a sort of irruption or on the peak of the poetic afflatus.

The world being nothing but spirit made visible is, according to Tagore, fundamentally a thing of beauty. The scars and spots that are on the surface have to be removed. Mankind has to repossess and clothe itself with that mantle of beauty. The world is beautiful, because it is the image of the beauty, because it harbours, expresses and embodies the divine who is beauty supreme. Now by a strange alchemy, a wonderful effect of polarization, the very spiritual element in Tagore has made him almost a pagan and even a profane. For what are these glories of Nature and the still more exquisite glories that the human body has captured? They are but vibrations and modulations of beauty—the delightful names and forms of the supreme lover and beloved.

Socrates is said to have brought down philosophy from heaven to live among men upon earth. A similar exploit can be ascribed to Tagore. The spirit, the bare transcendental Reality contemplated by the orthodox *vedantins*, has been brought nearer to our planet, close to human consciousness in Tagore's vision, being clothed in earth and flesh and blood, made vivid with the colours and contours of the physical existence. The spirit is by all

means, but not necessarily asceticism and monasticism. So Tagore boldly declared in those famous lines of his:

“Mine is not the deliverance achieved through mere renunciation. Mine rather the freedom that tastes itself in a thousand associations.”²

The spirit of the age demands new gospel. Mankind needs and awaits a fresh revelation. The world and life are not an illusion or a lesser reality: they are as real as the pure spirit itself. Indeed, spirit and flesh, consciousness and matter are not antinomies. To consider them as such is itself an illusion. In fact, they are only two poles or modes or aspects of the same reality. To separate or divide them is a one-sided concentration or abstraction on the part of the human mind. The fulfillment of the spirit is in its expression through matter. Human life too reaches its highest term, its *summum bonum*, in embodying the spiritual consciousness here on earth and not dissolving itself in the transcendence. This is the new dispensation which answers to the deepest aspiration in man and towards which he has been traveling through the ages in the course of evolution of his consciousness. Many are the prophets and mystics who have set this ideal before humanity and more insistently and clearly as we come nearer to the age we live in. But very few have expressed it

with such beauty and charm and compelling persuasion. Tagore is poetic. It is not necessary that one should find in his ideas and experiences and utterances the cent percent accuracy and inevitability of a yogic consciousness. His major perceptions are borne out by the highest spiritual realization.

Tagore is no inventor or innovator when he posits spirit as beauty, the spiritual consciousness as the ardent rhythm of ecstasy. This experience is the very core of *vaishnavism* and for which Tagore is sometimes called a *neo-vaishnava*. The *vaishnava* sees the world pulsating in glamorous beauty as nothing but love and beauty. Still Tagore is not all *vaishnava* or merely a *vaishnava*. He is in addition a modern. In the sense that problems exist for him—social, political, economic, national, humanitarian—which have to be faced and solved. These are not merely mundane, but woven into the texture of the fundamental problem of human destiny, of soul and spirit and God. A *vaishnava* was, in spite of his acceptance of the world, an *introvert*, to use a modern psychological phrase, not necessarily in the pejorative sense, but in the neutral scientific sense. He looks upon the universe and human life as the play of the Lord, as an actuality and not mere illusion indeed. But he does not participate or even take interest in the dynamic working out of the world process, he does not care to

know, has no need of knowing that there is a terrestrial purpose and a diviner fulfilment of the mortal life upon earth. "The *vaishnava* dwells more or less absorbed in the *vaikuntha* of his inner consciousness. The outer world, although real, is only a symbolic shadow. It is a play to which he can but be a witness."³

A modern idealist does not satisfy with that role. If he is merely a moralist reformer, he will revolt against the witness business, calling it a *laissezfaire* mentality of bygone days. A spiritual reformer asks for more-a dynamic union with the divine will and consciousness, not merely a passive enjoyment in the bliss, so that he is a luminous power or agent for the expression of divine values in things.

It is not the acceptance of the world. It is not even joyous acceptance. The world views it as an inexplicable and mysterious and magic play of God. There is aspiration and endeavour to change and mould it in the pattern of its inner divine realities. There are such realities which seek expression and embodiment in earthly life. It is the great mission and labour of humanity and that is all the meaning of man's existence here below. And Tagore is one of the great prophets and labourers who had the vision of the shape of things to come and work for it.

Only it must be noted, that unlike mere moral reformists or scientific planners, Tagore grounded himself upon the eternal ancient truths that “age cannot wither nor custom stale”---the divine truths of the spirit.

The poetic power put him in the service of the great cause for the divine uplift of humanity. Naturally, it goes without saying, his poetry did not preach the truths for which he stood. He had a fine and powerful weapon in his prose to do the work, even then in a poetic way-but to sing them. And he sang them not in their philosophical bareness or in their sheer transcendental austerity like some of the *Upanishadic rishis*, but in and through human values and earthly norms. The especial aroma of Tagore`s poetry lies exactly here, as he himself says, in the note of unboundedness in things bounded that it describes.

Thus, on the one hand, the infinity is brought nearer home to us in its embodied symbols and living vehicles and vivid formulations. It becomes easily available to mortals, even like the father to his son, to use a *Vedic* phrase. On the other hand, earthly things, mere humanities are uplifted and suffused with a ‘light that never was, on sea or land.’

“Earth-souls needing the touch of the heaven’s peace to

recapture,

Heaven needing earth’s passion to quiver its peace into

rapture.

Marry, O lightning eternal, the passion of a moment born fire!

Out of thy greatness draw close to the breast of our mortal

desire!”⁴

This is Tagore’s soul-prayer, his deepest aspiration.

In Rabindranath, in his life as well as in his art, especially in his poetry, the thing that has taken shape is what we call aspiration, an upward urge and longing of the inner soul. In common parlance it is a seeking for the divine, in philosophical terms it is a spiritual quest.

But Rabindranath is a modern poet. He cannot be wholly included in the older category, fixed in mould of clear definition. To be sure, the special characteristic of his consciousness is to keep as far as possible the aim, the ideal, the goal and the deity of the worship indivisible and indefinable. To make something definite and clear is to limit and make it gross and material. Therefore to

name the deity whom he loves, adores and worships he has used words that are expansive, general and vague. They are infinite, boundless, formless and non-manifest. If the deity appears in a manifested form the worship of the worshipper ends. The deity also will no longer be a deity of the worship. But it does not mean that the deity of Rabindranath is `the one beyond sound, touch, form and change` of the *Upanishad*. His aspiration is for another realization of the *Upanishad*.

“One who has taken this form, that form and all the
forms”

Or

“He being bodiless dwells in the forms and non-
forms as well.”⁵

The supreme truth cannot be called formless simply because it has no special form. He is formless since His form has no limit. He is not exclusively bound by any special form. He is not merely infinite and boundless but also delightful and ambrosial. He is endearing and with His endearing form He dwells behind all forms. It cannot be said definitely whether He is seen or

not through forms. In this way he attracts the soul of man perpetually towards Him.

Rabindranath has not seen his beloved with his eyes open. He has not sensed Him with unblinking eyes, nor even has he wished to do so. His delight and achievement consist in making Him mysterious and nebulous by keeping Him aloof, and veiling Him in innumerable names, forms, colours, rhythms, hints, gestures, ways and means. This object is infinite and boundless. It is unknown and unfamiliar.

It is a damsel unfamiliar, remote and fond of mirth and play. It is a constant separation from the beloved. Though it is an object of deep love it has made this love intense, sweet and poignant, moving and overflowing. Such a longing for the far-off beloved made Shelly restless. His *Skylark* is the living idol of this longing. Shelly's object of love also is a deity dwelling in a distant world:

“The desire of the moth for the Star,

Of the night for the morrow,

The devotion to something afar---

From the sphere of our sorrow.”⁶

This is equally the quintessence of Tagore`s message. For this reason people brought up in European culture used to call Rabindranath the Shelly of Bengal. There is a close kinship between the two in this upward urge.

This spiritual aspiration was called quest in the scriptures of the west. The quest of the knights for the Holy Grail inflamed the heart of Europe to a great extent for a time. Its art and literature bear abundant indication of this. The poetic consciousness of Rabindranath is no less shaped by the west than by the *Upanishads*. In many cases we see that as the *vedanta* is in his inner being, in the marrow of his bones, so there is Europe in his poetic consciousness, in flesh and blood. Rabindranath is a unique blending of these two.

However, due to the unique quality of the aspiration, curiosity and seeking which we have mentioned as being in his heart, two qualities are perceptible in his poetical style. First is the style, the speed or the swing of rhyme and rhythm and the second the cadence of tune. Starting from `Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga`, the awakening of the fountain, `My heart dances to-day`, and `Lo, he comes with rapture`, to `the restless, irresistible flutterings of the wings`, of `Balaka`, the same style shows itself in a fast and almost merry stepping. Restlessness for an

uninterrupted forward march of the soul and the inner consciousness to proceed ever still more, still further and still higher, is the nature of the divine flame residing in the heart. So the delight of journeying incessantly becomes the aim and ideal of man's life. The *Vedic mantra*--`caraiveti`, `move, move on`, was dear to Tagore. We surpass the aim of today and another appears on the horizon. Today's high precipice is left behind as a foothill. A higher precipice looms ahead, and behind it rears one still higher, thus an unending range. There is no stopping, never say there is `no further`.

“The message of the poet's heart runs:

To evert one Thou hast given a home,

Me only the road to press on.

Or

O there is no home for you,

No bed of flowers,

Only two wings and the vast expanse

Of the sky.

O soul, O Bird of my heart!

Close not, O blind one, your wings.

Further:

O Charioteer of my life's journey!

I am a pilgrim on the eternal road,

I bow to Thee on my wayfaring.”⁷

This sense of ever progressive movement is very evident in Rabindranath. Several critics have compared Bergson with him in this connection. There is much similarity between the two; the difference also is vital and fundamental. The progression of Bergson is the final, ultimate, sole and primeval truth. It is mere progressiveness without any cause. It is doubtful if it has any other is a secondary sign of this progression. There is no purpose behind it. If there be any, then this movement loses its natural, spontaneous rhythm. But Tagore is a child of the orient. However enamoured he might be of progressiveness, there is somewhere behind him “the static poise in home” of the *Upanishads*. However great might be his advance for the sake of advance, he knows after all that there is:

“Peace boundless where comes a mighty halt.

Quiet, sublime, deep and silent Glory.”

The movement in Rabindranath is not for its own sake, neither aimless nor eyeless. It is open to the light, it is luminous.

“Each star of the sky invites the human soul

The invitation to him is from all the worlds,

To the horizon of the East in teeming light.

Again,

Let thy deathless flower bloom towards the light

In the world and the worlds beyond, ever anew.”

The movement is fundamentally a spiritual aspiration, a longing for the divine. This aspiration and this longing are sweet, deep and penetrating and at once refined and transparent. The *élan vital* of Bergson is mainly a movement of nature and the life-force, however he might have tried to put on it towards the end a veneer of spirituality, of Christian religiosity.

Indeed this dynamism has given a unique stamp to Tagore's mode of expression. The peace and silence about which he speaks often dwell in the consciousness hidden at the core as a refuge or as a hope and anticipation, and intimation from beyond. There is a pause in the heart of rhythm or at the end of a bar of tune. Cadence in Tagore represents the movement of progression in

life and consciousness. The natural echo of time-flow and sound and melody and motion we find in the following lines:

“Whoever moves goes on singing
To the land of abundance.”

Or,

“Farther and farther
The road goes on ringing with a thin, poignant,
Lengthening note.”

Dance and music almost run abreast. From the viewpoint of spiritual realization we find that aspiration and invocation have the same origin. The spontaneous utterance of the heart is the mounting self-revelation and self declaration of the aspiration.

“All that I have not attained,
All that I have not struck
Are vibrating on the chords
Of my Lyre.”

Let us recollect in this connection Shelley’s

“And singing still dost soar and soaring ever singest.”

Tagore is known to us as music incarnate. The simple, natural form of his poetic soul has expressed itself through songs and lyrics.

Our mind and heart are carried away by the seductive charm of beautiful language, fine rhythm and an enchanting picture. But our physical eyes fail to seize a meaningful substance or a direct and clear experience behind the words. No doubt, evidently there is an effort to formulate some realization, but nothing solid has been achieved. Everything is fluid and thin and tenuous, about to vanish like vapour. That is why critics of the classical school accused Tagore of obscurity and enigmatic vagueness—all a play of whims, caprices and fancies. The clear, direct and positive certainty of the truth-seer is lacking there. Rabindranath cannot sing in unison with the *Vedic* sages, “May we behold the Sun with open and undazed eyes.”⁸

To some extent, perhaps, it is true that if we compare Tagore with those who stand on the peaks in world literature, we find in their creation an utmost, flawless harmony and synthesis between speech and substance. In Tagore we find on the whole speech and substance his poetic genius as it were, somewhat falls short of perfect perfection--except in a few instances. To be sure, substance does not mean mere wealth of clear intellectual

thoughts or solidity of subject-matter. Substance means the real essence, the very core, the thing in itself, a delight-truth gleaned in consciousness, made vibrant with life.

When consciousness turns inward it is the first fervour of aspiration, at once sweet, intense and full of pathos. It strikes the chords of life. There is a profound and touching cadence.

Rabindranath's pain never becomes extreme or tragic. The note of union is there hidden in his pang of separation: "O Death, thou art an equivalent to my Lord Krishna." Death is not death pure and simple. Immortality lies hidden therein. The poet had always a glimpse of the one whom he pursued in a ceaseless quest. In his 'Urvasi' this urge has reached its acme. It is there that his insight has fully opened up. The poet has attuned all the strings of his life energy to the highest note of his inner consciousness. The realization is as profound as the language is gathered and condensed, the metre and rhythm too are of the finest and richest quality. Here at least once the glory of a real epic has shown itself in his poetry. The full-throated epic tune is sounded in the voice of the poet:

"O Urvasi swaying soft and sweet,

When thou dancest before the assembly of the Gods.

Thrills of delight course through thy limbs,

Waves upon waves swirl rhythmically in the

bosom of the ocean,

The undulating tips of the shivering corn

Appear like the fluttering skirt of mother earth.

From the necklace hung upon thy breast

Drop down the stars on the floor of the sky.

And all at once man loses his heart in sheer rapture

The blood flows leaping and gurgling,

In the twinkling of an eye thy girdle gives way

At the far horizon, O naked Beauty!"

In the next phase, in his middle age when the poet arrived at a mature consciousness, when he wrote his 'Ferry Boat', he seems to have come down to a more normal, ordinary and homely tune in his expression, suited to the movements of everyday life. Superabundance of robes and ornaments has fallen away. The aspiration of these mellow days resembles the sweet, pastoral tune of the religious mendicant's one-stringed lyre.

“From the golden beach of the other shore

Imbedded in darkness

What enchantment came with a song upsetting my Work?”

This tune has been uppermost in most of the poems of ‘Gitanjali’ and ‘Gitali’. Afterwards we hear once again the resonance of high emotional, impassioned voice. The tune reaches a lofty pitch. The melody is far flung, but it is more steady and firm; no longer something fluid and amorphous but a formulation in solid concepts, an upsurge from a deeper and self-possessed source. In a poem *Balaka* he says:

“I hear the wild restless flutterings of wings

In the depth of silence, in the air, on land and sea.

Herbs and shrubs flap their wings over the earthly Sky

Millions of seeds open out their wings

Even like flights of cranes.

I see ranges of those hillocks, those forests

Moving with outspread wings from isle to isle,

From the unknown to the unknown.

With the flutter of starry wings,

Darkness glimmers in the weeping light.”

Tagore did not reach such heights of bold imageries and in such amplitude of melody. Enchanting moods and manners, figures and symbols, diverse and varied, were there, every one of them with its own specialty, beauty and gracefulness but it is doubtful whether they possess the sense of vastness and loftiness. The urge that finds expression here is not concerned merely with the aspiration of human beings or individuals. Here it is expressed in a profound, grandiose voice the aspiration of the inert soil and the mute earth; not merely in conscious beings but also in the subconscious world there vibrates an intense, passionate, vast, upward longing. A sleepless march proceeds towards the light from the bottom of the entire creation. Not only it is finely and adequately expressed but that reality has assumed its own form as it were in word and rhythm, as a living embodiment. In *'The Awakening of the Fountain'* we notice the lispings of this grand message, although the fountain there is a mere symbol or an image, and the significance too is to a considerable extent of the nature of an oration or discourse, nevertheless fundamentally the poet's dream remains the same.

Notes

- 1 .Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta *Essays on Mysticism*,(1970),p.97.
2. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Ibid*, p.99.
3. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Ibid*, p.100.
4. Nolini kanta Gupta *Ibid*, p.102.
5. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Sweet Mother* (New Talks), (1970),p.179.
6. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Ibid*, p.180.
7. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Ibid*,p.182.
8. Nolini Kanta Gupta *Ibid*, p.185.