CHAPTER - XII

THE CONCEPTION OF GOD IN GITANJALI

What an enviable god, this god of Tagore: the Great Friend, the Beloved, the Lotus flower, the unknown man playing a lute in the boat yonder on the river! A god akin to Tagore’s can be found in Jewish Biblical poetry belonging to the Mediterranean basin . . . . Now a days our god in the West is either the director of the Big All World Firm Inc., or the primitive imaginary playmate of the childish mind. He is the one we cry to in the hours of precipitate danger and in the hour of our death. This is why a spiritual reality like Tagore’s probably shall remain only one more eastern wonder to the western mind, yet for a long time to come.1

This meaningful, but lengthy exclamation of the famous

Tagore sympathiser Harold Laxness seems to be a very fitting introduction to our discussion in this chapter, the God -- concept in Gitanjali.

(Religious mysticism is communion between man, the finite, and God, the Infinite. ) Tagore's conception of man, was discussed in the last chapter. What remains to be done is to present his conception of God in Gitanjali. (It is really difficult to pinpoint the nature of Tagore's God in Gitanjali. The lyrics of Gitanjali which share a lot of its author's God-encounter, God-experience, do not give one a definitive concept of this Supreme Being. The God of Gitanjali presents a dangling nature. It is 'this' and 'that'. Tagore presents his God in His immanent as well as transcendent aspects. He is the 'sky' and He is the 'nest' (LXVII, 45). If for a moment He is seen as immanent in the world, the very next moment, He is felt as transcendent. And Tagore himself wavers to answer his people who He is, though he recognises Him in him and in everyone else, in every thing else and everywhere. In poem no.102 Tagore agrees, "I boasted among men that I had known you. They see your pictures in all works of
mine. They come and ask me, "Who is he?", I know not how to answer them. I say, "Indeed, I cannot tell." They blame me and they go away in scorn. And you sit there smiling" (CII, 67). What the passage tries to convey is the fact that to Tagore God remains more on the realm of experience and encounter than at a conceptual level of understanding.

Of course, the Infinite in Gitanjali is all-pervasive. He is immanent through the universe. That is why the poet says that the same life which runs through his veins also runs through the veins of the countless objects of Nature. It finds joyful, melodious expression through the sounds of Nature. This God of Tagore is one and indivisible, but He objectifies Himself through the countless objects and phenomena of Nature through her countless forms and shapes. He is the Universal Soul from whom is derived both the soul of man and the soul of Nature. The innumerable objects in Nature are nothing but the manifestations of the Supreme. Tagore's God pervades his (man's) body, heart and action. Hence the poet's duty to keep himself pure and free of all evil so that his body,
mind and heart may be the temple of God in the real sense of the phrase (IV, 3).

God comes to the poet through all ages and at all moments. He comes through the forests in the forms of perfume, rain and thundering clouds, in the dark month of July. He is the inspirer of all the songs the poet has sung. The poet asks confidently, "Have you not heard his silent steps?" In the very next breath he affirms, "He comes, comes, ever comes." These are the very opening words of poem no. 45. It is one of the most mystical of the poems in Gitanjali and it gives us a deeper understanding of the God of Gitanjali. Hence the rest of the lyric is quoted in full:

Every moment and every age, every day
and every night he comes, comes, ever comes.

Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed, 'He comes, comes, ever comes'.

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.
In the rainy flood of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine (XLV, 27).

Tagore's God in *Gitanjali* is immanent in Nature and in the life of man. The poet realises his mistake of leaving unnoticed the immanent God in the beauties of Nature in his hurried pace with his companions. He lingers back bearing the scorn of his companions. He exclaims, "All honour to you, heroic host of the interminable path!" (XLVIII, 30). Dr. Radhakrishnan interprets this lyric thus. The poet realizes, that his enthusiastic surrender to the spontaneity of natural scenery leads him to his soul. He then lies exposed to all the winds of heaven that blow. He feels a presence of all love and peace. The load slips off his heart and his soul is lifted above life's petty vexations and harassment and it slides into a perfect
harmony. Then the divine light floods his soul, the divine music ravishes him, and the poet expresses his supreme joy.

Tagore's God of *Gitanjali* needs man's love as much as man needs His. This is why God takes joy in the creation of glorious and beautiful forms of life and man has constant promptings of divine presence. God's need of love is as great as that of man's. God's will is realized only through man. Man shares God's joy in His creation and in turn he enhances his own joy. The beauty and splendour of nature are only decorations in which the divine lover decorates Himself to captivate the heart of man and to win his love. (LVI, 37). Thus man's love mingles with God's love which indeed, is the perfection of love. And Tagore's God yearns for it as much as he does. In poem no. 56 he asks, "O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?" In *Sadhana* Tagore affirms, "The universal is ever seeking its consummation in the unique."² In his sermon *On Prayer* he emphasizes

² *Sadhana* 56.
that where there is love, there is the touch of immortality in things mortal. Love casts the shadow of the Infinite upon life and death.

The God of Gitanjali is omnipresent. Though He is one, He expresses Himself in myriad shapes and forms. The Tagore of Gitanjali believes in the identity of Man, God and Nature. Every form of life, every object of Nature, is an expression of the divine. Poem no. 63 concludes, "When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many" (LXIII, 42).

Here is pantheistic mysticism par excellence. And the prayer implies that he may never lose the bliss which results from a realization of the eternal truth that it is God who manifests Himself in the many shapes and forms of the phenomenal world.

Though Tagore enjoys the all-pervading immanent God so much, the Supreme as the Saguna, Tagore still is quite aware that He is not this alone. He is haunted by the thought of the infinitude of God too. He himself
tries to ease the tension, to reconcile the opposites. It is in poem no. 67 that he does this. He opens the poem, "Thou art the sky and thou art the nest" (LXVII, 45). This symbolic assertion illustrates the finite and the infinite aspects of God. As a finite being Tagore's God objectifies Himself in the countless objects of Nature. But in reality He is infinite too. The conclusion of the sixtieth poem stresses this aspect of God. The poet sings "But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word" (LXVII, 45). The sky is a vast expanse without any limit or end, without any differences of colour and without any sounds. Such is the infinitude of God. Tagore, here, represents the infinite aspect of the Divine in all its wonder and awe.

The poet now realizes that he was "playing" with the King of Kings. And his whole body and his limbs are "Thrilled with the touch of Him Who is beyond touch." But when the "playtime" is over, the poet has a different sight. He is afraid. He asks in alarm,
"What is this sudden sight that is come upon me?" (XCVII, 64). It is the transcendent aspect of God that has dawned on him. He is now forced to stand apart. The Infinite is now the poet's Father, but not a friend or a brother. He worships Him from a distance. He confesses, "Time is endless in thy hands, my Lord. There is none to count thy minutes" (LXXXII, 55).

In the poems of Gitanjali one finds a poet who has a Jacob-like wrestling encounter with the Divine. His is an ineffable experience. And when experience is ineffable, communication becomes well nigh impossible. What Tagore does is to sincerely record his personal experience of God, who is at once far and near. It is because of the inexhaustible, inexpressible nature of the mystery of God that Tagore resorts to images and metaphors in Gitanjali.

However, in Gitanjali he does not reveal what God's true nature is. Yet he understands Him. He has had a mystical realization of Him. He is singing songs of God's greatness and glory. He encounters the Infinite with the simplicity of a child and the clarity of a sage. Hence his concept of the Eternal is uniquely individual and not astonishingly universal. It is a multifaceted God that Gitanjali presents.
Tagore has often confessed that he had been greatly influenced by the Upanishads. Naturally, he believes that God is one. He also believes that this "one, becomes many." We read in Sadhana, "The Upanishads say with great emphasis, know the one, the soul. Only those of tranquil minds, and none else, can abide in joy, by realizing within their souls the Being who manifests one essence in a multiplicity of forms." Here arises a question, "Why does the one become many?" Tagore answers this question thus "Our self is maya where it is merely individual and finite; where it considers its separateness as absolute, it is Satyam where it recognizes its essence in the universal and infinite, in the Supreme Self, in Paramatman." 

So the Ultimate Reality, for Tagore, is Satyam. But there is a second aspect to this Divinity which is anandam or bliss. The Absolute is Rasa. He is also Sivam or good. He is the good and the quiet (Santam)

4 Sadhana 35-36.
5 Sadhana 85.
because his ordained laws are in harmony with one another. He is also the Sundaram or the Beautiful, for one finds the image of bliss in beauty.6

Tagore believed that these attributes of the Godhead are mutually interpenetrating. He writes in Sedhama, "This is the ultimate object of our existence that we must ever know that beauty is truth, truth beauty."7 He affirms in Creative Unity, "Beauty is no phantasy, it has the everlasting meaning of reality."8

God is Rasa. Hence He, though one, becomes many, holds Tagore. He created the poet to play with and to express His love for him. The infinite willingly and gladly permits Himself to be caught in the meshes of the finite. They are the love objects of the Divine. Without the finites the eternal love-tryst comes to a stand still. There is an eternal thirst in the Infinite for the finite. God and the poet ever remain bound up


7 Sedhama 141.

8 Creative Unity 15.
in an indissoluble tie and the truth of one lies in
the truth of the other. Hence the Immanent God takes
multifaceted forms. In Gitanjali He is the Eternal
singer, the Solitary Way-Farer, the Eternal Lover, the
King of kings and the Beloved Mother, to specify a
few epithets.

Right from the beginning the God of Gitanjali
appears as a singer, as a poet. The Universe is His
song. Tagore in his Santiniketan affirms:

The universe in the form of a song is
never separated from the Singer. Nor is
the song made out of any external stuff.
It is his very heart bursting into a
melody.

The entire cosmic process exists in Him,
in the form of a complete song, but its
manifestation is not all at once. The
expression is subjected to the law of
evolution, but every step therein be-speaks
the eternal note.  

9 Qtd. in Srivatsava 136.
In *Gitanjali* Tagore sings, "Thy words take wing in songs from everyone of my birds' nests, and thy melodies will break forth in flowers in my forest groves" (XIX, 12).

Tagore's God in *Gitanjali* is the Master Musician and the song of the poet is just an imitation. The poet's heart longs to join in God's song, but he "vainly struggles for a voice." But God the Eternal Singer, commands the poet to sing and he sings proudly, enjoying the beauty in singing. Drunk with the joy of singing he forgets himself and calls God friend who is really the 'Lord' of his life. He knows that God takes pleasure in his singing. He has access to God's presence only as a singer. He touches God's feet, which relentlessly pursue him, "by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song" (II, 2).

In *Gitanjali* the poet's realization of God is dim and vague. God often remains to him a passer-by. He hears God's footsteps, but he does not often see His face. At times the poet experiences the nearness of his God. Then the poet makes his search intense, but still God hides Himself. The poet becomes despondent.
He says, "If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me wholly aside I know not how I am to pass those long rainy hours" (XVIII, 11). The poet now understands God as a lonely walker in the deserted street where the doors are shut at every house. He welcomes Him calling Him "my beloved." He requests God not to pass him by like a dream (XXII, 13). But still the poet is not sure of God's presence. He says "I can see nothing before me. I wonder where lies thy path" (XXIII, 14).

(The God of Gitanjali is a Lover. Poem no. 27 celebrates God as the Lover and the poet as the beloved. In the absolute darkness of the night the poet hears the sound of a sweet song floating to him, which he understands as the call of the Divine Lover to His beloved, the poet. The poet cannot find his way. The poet is conscious that he will be able to find his way only if he burns the bright light of love in his heart. And he prays, "Let not the hours pass by in the dark. Kindle the lamp of love with thy life") (XXVII, 16).

Tagore presents the God of Gitanjali as a lover
and himself as a flower girl, who waits for long for her divine lover to come, but He lingers behind the other passers-by. The poet begins poem no.41 with the question, "Where do at thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows?" Then he makes it clear, "They push thee and pass thee by on the dusty road, taking thee for naught. 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" (XLI, 23-24). Nevertheless, the God-lover visits the poet-beloved during the night. He goes away only with the light of day.

In some of the poems of Gitanjali Tagore pictures God as the King (L, 31). This is a tendency found in many a religion. Tagore's God is the king of his heart. When his "beggarly heart sits crouched, shut up in a corner", the poet wants the king "to break open the door [of his heart] and enter it" with the ceremony of a king (XXXIX, 22). When we analyse poem 39, we find that Tagore presents his God as the king of mercy and grace. He prays, "when the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy." When
grace is lost from his life the king should "come with a burst of song."

Poem no. 50 presents the poet as a beggar and God as the king of kings, who appears to the poet and asks him "What hast thou to give me?" The bewildered poet presents him with a "least little grain of corn" (L, 31). When the poet later emptied his bag he found "a least little gram of gold among the poor heap." Finally he promises the King of kings, "And when my work shall be done in this world . . . alone and speechless shall I stand before thee face to face" (LXXVI, 51).

The poet of Gitanjali addresses God as his beloved mother and promises her to weave a chain of pearls for her neck with tears of sorrow. He hopes his garland will find a place upon her breast though the "stars have wrought their anklets of light to deck" (LXXXIII, 55) her feet. (Aurobindo presents God as the Divine mother in his masterpiece Savitri.)

It is really difficult to discover the spot where

Tagore draws the line between his God's transcendence and immanence. He himself was quite aware of this problem. In *The Religion of Man* he writes. "The theologian may follow the scientist and shake his head and say that all that I have written is pantheism."¹¹ But he adds:

Let us not indulge in idolatry of name and dethrone living truth in its favour. When I say that I am a man, it is implied by that word that there is such a thing as a general ideal of Man which persistently manifests itself in every particular human being, who is different from all other individuals. If we lazily label such a belief as "pananthropɔ́̃́y" and divert our thoughts from its mysteriousness by such a title it does not help us much.¹²

In *Sadhana* Tagore affirms, "This joy, whose other name is love, must by its very nature have duality for

¹¹ *The Religion of Man* 64.
¹² *The Religion of Man* 64.
its realization." And he concludes that paragraph thus. "It is the joy that creates this separation, in order to realise through obstacles the union." \(^13\)

In spite of Tagore's self defence, there is some inconsistency in his conception of God as a person. His God is not fully transcendent and free. In poem no.11, he affirms, "Ouy master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever" (XI, 7). Tagore seems to overemphasize the impersonal aspect. The influence of the Hindu scriptures and his aesthetic outlook are primarily responsible for this. The more the aesthetic overshadows the ethical the more this tendency will be visible. \(^14\)

In Tagore's Gitanjali the mystic communion presented is one of 'unity' as against the Christian concept of 'union'. Here unity means 'absolute identity', or 'Physical oneness' and 'union' means 'communion' in love. That is, in mystical communion, in the traditional

\(^13\) Sadhana 86-87.

Christian sense, God and man preserve their individual 'identities' even when they 'abide' in each other. So in *Gitanjali*, true to the Upanishadic tradition, the conception of God is essentially monistic, though hints of dualism are discernible. Tagore concludes poem no. 20, "I knew not then that it was so near, that it was mine, and that this perfect sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart" (XX, 12).