CHAPTER - II

TAGORE'S MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

A work of art ought to be studied and evaluated in the perspective of the whole life and context of its author -- the man himself, his milieu and the moment, having in mind, especially those elements which will throw light on the particular topic in hand. The subject of study in this attempt being mysticism in Gitanjali, before analysing the strands of mysticism in it in detail, the poet has to be presented in the proper backdrop which will enable a lucid assertion of the thrust of the thesis. This chapter, therefore, attempts to place Tagore in the background of the mystical experiences he vouches for in his works like My Reminiscences (1917), The Religion of An Artist and The Religion of Man (1931). They can be relied upon safely as they are all autobiographical expositions, either in prospect or in retrospect, of the deep thoughts of a mastermind. Sisirkumar Ghose writes, "He had written and spoken on religious matters nearly
all his life. But it was the invitation for the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford that forced him to a retrospective statement. At the time the poet was nearing seventy and these lectures, partly a command performance, may be taken as his mature, if not final, reflections on the subject." ¹

In The Religion of Man, Tagore writes, "It has followed the current of my temperament from early days until it suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision." ² The entire religious outlook of Tagore is conditioned by this "direct vision." It left a lasting message in his memory. In The Religion of An Artist he writes, "All that I feel about it (religion) is through vision and not from knowledge . . . . I am sure there have come moments when my soul has touched the infinite and become intensely conscious of it through the illumination of joy." ³ He was constantly


aware of this "touch". It imparted to him inspiration through some "unseen trackless channel", and provided him with "a mysterious line of growth." 4

It is in the very prime of his youth that Tagore experienced a mystic trance. He was residing at Jorasanko on the Sudder Street in Calcutta. It was afternoon. The approaching evening appeared before him with an extraordinary wealth of joy and beauty. The effect of that enchanting experience was that his self was pushed into the background and the world was permitted to display its true significance. The cover of everyday triviality was lifted and the world appeared full of joy and beauty.

This experience at Jorasanko prepared Rabindranath for a still richer experience. He was standing on the verandah of his house and watching the sunrise from behind the tree-tops. Suddenly he felt that some screen had been pierced through, uncovering a world

4 The Religion of Man 58.
flooded with beauty, joy and universal light. He recounts the experience thus: "One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had, in a moment, been lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy." It was as if the invisible screen of the commonplace had been removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance had been intensified in the poet's mind. The radiance pierced through the foldness of sadness and despondency, which had accumulated over his heart and flooded it with the universal light. Of course Tagore asserts that that which is memorable in this experience is its human message, the sudden expansion of his consciousness in the super-personal world of man. This aspect of the vision, the humanistic side,

5 The Religion of Man 58.
6 The Religion of Man 58.
this thesis does not overlook. It will be dealt with in detail in the chapter on humanistic mysticism. After four days the vision disappeared and the lid hung down upon his inner sight. In the dark, the world once again put on its disguise of the obscurity of an ordinary fact. 8

At an older age another experience of mystical vision dawned on Tagore. The day that had its special significance for him came with all its drifting trivialities of the commonplace. He had finished his morning work. He was about to have a bath. He stood for a moment at his window, overlooking a market place on the bank of a dry river bed, welcoming the first flood of rain along with its channel. Suddenly he became conscious of a "stirring of soul" 9 within him. His world of experience in a moment seemed to become lighted, and facts that were detached and dim found a greater unity of meaning. The feeling he had was

8 The Religion of Man 58.

9 The Religion of Man 59.
like that which a man, groping through a fog, without knowing his destination, might feel when he suddenly discovers that he stands before his own house.

"Nirgharer Swapnbang" is the poetic expression of Tagore's first mystical experience. It was written on the very first day of the vision. Tagore himself comments on this poem: "The waterfall whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation, was touched by the sun and bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea." Here the sea symbolises the Infinite. To the seer-poet, it was some mysterious being which touched his inner chord and opened before him a wider vision. It enriched him with an insight which continued to illumine the horizons of his everyday consciousness. It faded out leaving in his memory a direct message of spiritual reality. The intensely illuminative vision of a couple of hours revealed to him a world-view, which formed the basis of his subsequent reflections and outlook.

10 Translated into English under the title, "The Awakening of the Waterfall."

11 My Reminiscences 224.
This is particularly true of Gitanjali.

With the dawn of mystic experience even the most trivial things in the universe undergo a transvaluation in the mind of Tagore. They no more emphasize to him the fact of their separateness, but instead point to the unity encompassing them all. The entire universe appears to him as a vast sea, representing a unity. And the separateness of things is viewed only as varying modifications deriving their reality from the fundamental unity. The fundamental unity of things, which is usually missed in man's ordinary consciousness, is asserted in mystic realization. Tagore admirably does this in Gitanjali. The thread of oneness running through the universe, according to Tagore, has its source in man's inner unity. He says, "Through all the diversities of the world the one in us is threading its course towards the One in all."\(^12\)

Tagore's Prabhat Sangit\(^13\) and Pratidhwani\(^14\) which

\(^12\) Rabindranath Tagore, Sadhana: The Realization of Life (1913; Madras: Macmillan, 1979) 39.

\(^13\) Translated into English under the title Morning Songs.

\(^14\) Translated into English under the title Echo.
seem to have been under the immediate spell of the mystic illumination, appeared around the same time.\textsuperscript{15} He refers to the psychological background which found expression in these poems and writes:

I had so long viewed the world with external vision only . . . when of a sudden, from some innermost depth of my being, a ray of light found its way out, it spread over and illuminated for me the whole universe . . . . This experience seemed to me of the stream of melody issuing from the very heart of the universe, spreading over space and time, re-echoing thence as waves of joy which flow right back to the source.\textsuperscript{16}

The dawn of such a vision seems to have brought about a decisive change in his outlook which, almost, revolutionised his world view.

\textsuperscript{15} My Reminiscences 222.

\textsuperscript{16} My Reminiscences 178.
Some of the characteristics of this vision may also be suggested here. Tagore encountered his mystic ecstasy at a crucial period of adolescence. He was eighteen. His father too had a similar experience when he was eighteen. It is significant that some of the distinguished mystics received their initiation into mystical career more or less at this age. Henrich Suso had an abrupt vision of the Infinite at the age of eighteen. Brother Lawrence was redeemed once for all from the slavery of illusion at the same age. St. Francis of Assisi was only twenty-four when he received his mystical awareness, enlightenment, which transformed his consciousness.

Tagore experienced the mystic vision with a suddenness and spontaneity rare in other experiences. It came quite unsought and unexpected. He writes, "when I was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious

17 The Maharshi writes, "... a strange sense of the Unreality of all things suddenly entered my mind. I was as if no longer the same man ... in my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before. I was then eighteen years old." [Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi, Trans., The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore (London: Macmillan, 1914)] 38.

experience for the first time came to my life."\textsuperscript{19} By way of description he adds, "I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment, been lifted from my sight."\textsuperscript{20} Thus mystic visions come to Tagore with a surprise and he receives it unexpectedly at a moment when he is not seeking for it consciously. He feels that somewhere from the inner recesses of his being a seed "unexpectedly sends up sprouts into the heart of a luminous freedom."\textsuperscript{21} Tagore experiences a spiritual outburst "which is like the underground current of a perennial stream unexpectedly welling up, on the surface."\textsuperscript{22}

Many mystics have experienced spontaneous and sudden mystic visions. St. Francis of Assisi was "suddenly smitten by unwanted visitations" and "found himself a different man" and "fell down before the

\textsuperscript{19} The Religion of Man 58.
\textsuperscript{20} The Religion of Man 58.
\textsuperscript{21} The Religion of Man 56.
\textsuperscript{22} The Religion of Man 57.
crucifix in devout supplication."\(^{23}\) St. Catherine of Sienna "suddenly as she knelt before him [her confessor] she received in her heart the wound of the unmeasured love of God, with so clear a vision of her own misery and her faults, and of the goodness of God, that she almost fell upon the ground."\(^{24}\) Mme Guyon, too, received a sudden flash of mystic illumination on hearing an instruction from a Franciscan friar. She confesses, "These words had put into my heart that which I sought for so many years, or, rather, they caused me to find that which was there."\(^{25}\) Underhill concludes, "If we may judge from those first-hand accounts which we possess, mystical conversion is a single and abrupt experience . . . . It usually involves a sudden and acute realization of a splendour and adorable reality in the world . . . never before perceived."\(^{26}\) Tagore's account of his mystical


\(^{25}\) Qtd. in Underhill, Mysticism, 184.

\(^{26}\) Underhill, Mysticism. 178.
vision, more or less, confirms this observation.

Tagore's vision had been transitory as well. It lasted only for a few days. He found himself back in his normal consciousness afterwards. His first vision lasted only for four days. As William James observes, "Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day."27 James, as we have indicated in the first chapter, terms this as the 'transiency' of the mystical vision. Maharshi Debendranath appears to have retained the vision for a night.28 Margaret Prescott Montague in an essay entitled "Twenty Minutes of Reality" claims to have "caught a glimpse of the ecstatic beauty of reality" for that duration.29

After the vision Tagore experienced a trail of


melancholy feeling. He found himself in a state of depression. He roamed amidst nature in search of peace. He wished to rediscover the lost vision. He went to the Himalayas for a deeper vision. In My Reminiscences he writes, "I wandered about amongst the firs, I sat near the falls and bathed in their waters. I gazed at the grandeur of Kinchinjunga through a cloudless sky, but in what had seemed to me the likeliest of places, I found it not. I had come to know it but would see it no longer." 30

Tagore, here, shares a phenomenon common to many mystics. St. Suso had a similar experience after the passing away of the moments of mystical delight. He remarks, "It seemed at this time as if God had given permission to both men and demons to torment the Servitor." 31 Describing a similar state St. Angela of Folingo says, "Every vice re-awakened within me. I

30 My Reminiscences 22.

31 Qtd. in William James, 319.
would have chosen rather to be roasted than to endure such pains." 32

Though Tagore's mystical vision was a sudden, transitory experience and it left a melancholy feeling in him, nevertheless, it enriched him with an insight which continued to illumine the horizons of his everyday consciousness. The vision faded out leaving in his "memory a direct message of spiritual reality." 33 The intensely illuminative vision revealed to Tagore a world-view, which formed the basis of his subsequent reflections and outlook. The direct message of spiritual reality, which Tagore received in his early youth, made a permanent impression on him and continued to add a characteristic mystic touch in all his subsequent utterances and attitudes, especially in Gitanjali. The mystic trance was not only a passing casual affair for him, but an experience which moulded

32 Qtd. in Underhill, Mysticism 392.
33 Religion of Man 58.
his entire outlook. The passing away of the uncommon experience provided him with a memory which continued to reveal the commonplace in its true significance.

It has been specified in the introduction that the poetics of procedure in this essay rests mainly on the study of the images and symbols the poet uses and the explication of individual poems. Hence the next chapter endeavours to enlist, explain and interpret the mystical symbols and images in Gitanjali and to show how they are built into the mystical texture of the whole work.