

An Insight into Rabindranth Tagore's Works, with Special References to his Contemporary Political, Social and Economic Issues

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was described as Great Sentinel by Mahatma Gandhi. Tagore suffocated in Colonial rule and craved for radical changes in the society, nation and overall in the basic lifestyle of layman. He always advocated for liberty, equality and fraternity of common mass. His literature was infused with patriotic feelings. Gitanjali, the masterpiece of Tagore and his strategy for survival in an enslaved nation, won him Nobel prize for literature. Most of his literary work is devoted to mankind. He opines that man is great. His greatness is hidden in his love. Even though the flow of lyrics is mystical but the ultimate end is humanism. The great poet believed that the salvation can be attained through oneness of individual soul with the soul of the world. Tagore believed that our sense organs are created by God so that we can enjoy the form, colour, beauty, taste which are revealed in nature. Finally, it can be commented that simplicity of words, the devotional theme, the reforming spirit and closeness with humanity all collectively charmed the readers of whole World.

Rabindranath Tagore, a great Indian dramatist, novelist and poet was born in Calcutta in 1861. He was mainly educated at home. Tagore is a poet of Indian cultural and national resurgence. As a poet, Tagore's imagination is silky yet genuine and realistic. His writings spellbound readers and arrest our mind and soul equally and one forgets sorrow, sufferings and sadness of life on reading his poetry. He sings of the pleasing flora, fauna and fountains. He touches the earth and also leaps to the sky. His description about motherland is always packed with extra fervor of devotional zeal. Most of his writings are full of deep religious and patriotic feelings. He was awarded the nobel prize for his book "Gitanjali".

Tagore was born in an upper caste privileged Bengali family. He was instantly surrounded by the cultural and political excitement of late colonial rule in India. His heroic attitude is clearly visible in his poem:

"Just then there bursts out a fearful yell, and figures come running towards us.

You sit crouched in your palanquin and repeat the names of the gods in prayer.

The bearers, shaking in terror, hide themselves in terror, hide themselves in the thorny bush.

I shout to you, Don't be afraid, mother. I am here."

The complete range and uniqueness of writings i.e. his novels, poems, plays, songs and paintings are perhaps due to his contemporary political, social and economic

issues. He finds his literary pieces as instruments through which he articulates his psychology regarding the upheaval that enveloped India from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Some of the Critics also regard Tagore as a mystic. The reason is obvious, he is very much present in Bengali literature and culture but he is completely forgotten from the rest of the literary world. He is deeply relevant and many sided contemporary thinker in Bangladesh and India. He is imagined in the West as a repetitive and remote spiritualist. Certainly, As a mystic poet Rabindranath Tagore may be compared to the Western Poets such as Yeats, Ezra Pound, and his other early champions.

Rabindranath Tagore hailed from a Hindu family- one of the aristocratic families, who owned valuable estates mostly in what is now Bangladesh. Though, he was brought up in a staunch Hindu family but his religious feelings didn't prevent the largely Muslim citizens of Bangladesh from having a deep sense of identity with Tagore and his ideology. Tagore's masterpiece –“Amar Sonar Bangla” which means “my golden Bengal” was chosen as Bangladesh's national anthem. The contemporary world was full of disturbance and critics called it “clash of civilization”. It was also confusing when Tagore himself described his Bengali Family as the product of “a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and British.”His very well known work “Gora” deals with the problem of national belonging. The protagonist of the story Gora is the British Orphan. He was brought up in a Hindu Family, only to discover his true identity as an adult.

Tagore's highest achievement was establishment of Shantiniketan in 1901. He started imaginative, innovative system of education. With the help of his impressive writings and a large number of dedicated, devoted students, he was emerging as a leader in nation's social, political and cultural movements.

Both Gandhi and Tagore were the most eminent leaders in the twentieth century. Many critics have commented on the writing skill and ideology of the great national leaders. On learning of Rabindranath Tagore's death, Jawaharlal Nehru, then was imprisoned in a British jail . He wrote in his prison diary for August 7, 1941:

“Gandhi and Tagore. Two types entirely different from each other ,and yet both of them typical of India, both in the long line of India's great men...It is not so much because of any single virtue but because of the tout ensemble, that I felt among the world's great men today Gandhi and Tagore were supreme as human beings. What good fortune for me to have come into close contact with them.”

Tagore extremely disliked communal distinction and difference. He was hostile to Hindu conventional ideology that was antagonistic to Islamic, Christian or Sikh perspectives. As a thinker, he always appreciated English leaders and English books. According to him, Englishmen and their literature have given birth to the notion of political liberty. But against cosmopolitanism he maintained that the English were self dependent, and so must Indians. In 1917 he once more denounced the danger of ‘ leaving everything to the unalterable will of the Master.’

Tagore was a great supporter of secularism. He was a great supporter of cultural diversity. He wanted Indians to learn what is going on elsewhere, how others lived, what they valued, and so on, while remaining interested and involved in their own culture and heritage. It means he wanted attachment with all religions, cultures and faiths. Indeed, he urged Indian students going abroad for education to work as cultural ambassadors.

His love for all cultures becomes evident from the following anecdote. In 1907 he wrote to his son-in-law Nagendranath Gangulee, who visited America for study-visa:

“To get on familiar terms with local people is a part of your education. To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one’s identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room.”

Almost all freedom fighters appreciated Tagore’s role in India’s national struggle. We all know that our national anthem, “Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka” was composed by him. Bangladesh later on selected another song of Tagore, “Amar Sonar Bangla” as its national anthem. He is the only one bard to have composed the national anthems of two different countries.

Gandhi and Tagore had different opinion about Science. Tagore asserted that modern Science was essential to understand physical phenomena. The report of his discourse with great scientist Einstein, published in the New York Times in 1930, shows that Tagore was insistent on interpreting truth through observation and reflective concepts. To assert that something is true or untrue in the absence of anyone to observe or perceive is truth, or to form a conception of what it is, appeared to Tagore to be deeply questionable.

When Einstein remarked, “If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?”

Tagore simply replied, “NO.”

Going further- and into much more interesting territory- Einstein said, “I agree with regard to this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.”

Tagore’s response was: “Why not? Truth is realized through men.”

Here it is necessary do discuss an anecdote. Both of them thought in total different ways about Science and citizens. In January 1934, Bihar was destroyed by an earthquake, which killed thousands of people. Gandhi was deeply involved in the fight against untouchability and caste system at that time.

Tagore gave it top priority that people should live and think freely. His notion towards man and his life is clearly reflected in the poem Gitanjali:

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been

Broken up into fragments

by narrow domestic walls;.....

Where the clear stream of reason

has not lost its way into the

dreary desert sand of dead habit;

The above written lines clearly show his great fervor for patriotism. At the same time he strongly resented foreign rule. He strongly disliked dividing forces such as culture, caste, colour, creed, sex, language etc. He strongly condemned these fragmentary forces along with rigid traditionalism, which makes an individual prisoner of the orthodox thinking.

Tagore deeply disliked chains, shackles and bonding for irrational past that could not be modified by contemporary reasoning and rational thinking. Once, Mahatma Gandhi visited Tagore's Institution Shantiniketan, a scholar asked him to sign her autograph diary. Then he mentioned, "Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it fulfill it at the cost of your life." When he saw this entry, Tagore became angry. He wrote in the same book a short poem in Bengali to the effect that no one can be made "a prisoner with a chain of clay." He also concluded this poem in English, possibly so that Gandhi could read it too, "Fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong."

Three Phases in Tagore's Literary Career:

Tagore's literary career can be broadly classified in three phases:

During his first phase of literary composition, he contributed Sandhya-Sangeet, Prabhat Sangeet, Chabi O Gan, Kadi O Kamal, Manasi, Sonar Tari, Chitra, Jivan Devata etc.

During the second phase of literary composition, he wrote some masterpieces. The most remarkable of these works was Gitanjali. English translation of Gitanjali brought Nobel Prize and world fame to the poet. During the second phase, his important works were Chaitali, Kalpara, Katha O Kahini, Kahini, Naibedya, Samaran, Sisu, Utsarga, Kheya, Gitanjali etc.

During the last phase, he contributed- Purabi, Mahua, Banabani, The Child etc.

Tagore never restrained himself to the word translator, especially in the case of 'Gitanjali.' He took many liberties while composing in English, though he opted for the same thought, theme and subject of the original work. The Nobel prize winning work Gitanjali's English version is different from Bengali version. In its translated forms, it has some poems which were never written in original Bengali masterpiece. These poems in English version were culled from some other collection. There is a vast difference between meaning of both versions. The work is newly crafted rather than translated. In fact, it is an example of transcreation.

Tagore took liberties with original work and rewrote the poems in English rather than attempting an actual literary translation. He made many changes in the original work. At some instances, he combined two or three poems in a single poem. At other times, he also presented a single original poem into two or more poems.

The great man had many dimensions in his personal life. He followed his father in working for the Adi-Bhrahmo Samaj and became its secretary. As a nutshell, It may be concluded that he led an unhappy personal life. The great soul married in 1883, could enjoy his married life for nineteen years only, then his better half passed away in 1902. Afterwards, he never remarried. During his married life-he wrote to his better half, Mirnalini:"If you and I could be comrades in all our work and in all our thoughts it would be splendid, but we cannot attain all that we desire."

The great poet enjoyed warm, healthy, harmonious companionship with Kadambri, wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath. It was a strong Platonic attachment. He dedicated some poems to her before his marriage, and several books afterward, some after her death(she committed suicide, for reasons that are not fully understood, at the age of twenty-five, four months after Rabindranath's wedding).

During his later visit to Argentina in 1924-1925, Rabindranath Tagore came in contact with talented and beautiful Victoria Ocampo, who later became the publisher of 'Sur' the literary magazine. Both of them became close friends, but it seems that Rabindranath deflected the possibility of a passionate relationship into a confined intellectual one. One of his companions in the above mentioned tour observed their companionship and commented, "Besides having keen intellectual understanding of his books, she was in love with him- but instead of being content to build a friendship on the basis of intellect, she was in a hurry to establish that kind of proprietary right over him which he absolutely would not brook."

It is evident that Rabindranath himself was much inclined towards that lady. He called her 'Vijaya'(the Sanskrit equivalent of Victoria), dedicated a poetry book to the lady entitled- 'Purabi'. It means- an evening melody and deeply expressed great appreciation for her mind.

After a gap of five years, Tagore visited Europe in 1930 and he sent her a cable: "Will you not come and see me." Then she did. But their relationship continued upto discourse and conversation only. Even their correspondence was ambiguous and it continued for some years. The great poet left for heavenly abode in 1941. Before one year of his death, he composed a poem 'Sesh Lekha', which was written about Victoria Ocampo. His passionate love for the lady is evident in the quote, " How I wish I could once again find my way to that foreignland where waits for me the message of love!..... Her language I knew not, but what her eyes said will forever remain eloquent in its anguish."

However indecisive, or confused, or awkward Rabindranath may have been, he certainly did not share Mahatma Gandhi's censorious views of sex. In fact, when it came to social policy, he advocated contraception and family planning while Gandhi preferred abstinence.

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