

## Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Gitanjali* :

### A Reflection of the Vision of Human Aspiration in the poem

#### *Where the Mind is Without Fear*

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#### Abstract

Versatile genius Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) who did “bestride the world like a Colossus”, the epitome of Indian lore and spiritual legacy, portrayed multicolored human aspirations in his poems he penned for the *Gitanjali*. A glimpse of the mystic beauty and romantic splendour of the Indian art and culture flashed across the firmament of the Western literature. The *Gitanjali* was rightly recommended to the Swedish Committee that awarded Tagore – the first non-white litterateur outside the West – the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature for his work “Geetanjali”. Kabuliwala, Geetanjali, Gora are few of his famous works. The poem we would like to discuss here *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, included in the volume called *Naibedya*, later published in English ‘Gitanjali’ is a prayer to a universal father-figure, presumably, God to elevate his country into a free land. This poem is the portrayal of the poet’s idealistic world he aspired India to be awakened into. Tagore has a vision in his mind that cuts through the cross-section of narrow squeamishness, squalor and multifarious angularities he painfully found around him. The poem reflects how the poet wishes to remove all his mortifications and envisage around him an idealistically free, fair, illustrious and fearless motherland he loved to the core of his heart. Tagore imagined his country India to be a heaven of freedom.

**KEYWORDS:** Prarthana, *Upanishads*, cosmic spiritual unification.

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#### Introduction:

While Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) was having a long sea voyage to London, he started translating the *Gitanjali* poems, written originally in Bengali, into English. The MS of translation was contained a little notebook, Tagore was carrying with him. Accidentally Tagore’s young son Rathindranath who was accompanying him misplaced, in a London subway, the brief case containing the notebook. A good Samaritan recovered and returned the brief case the very next day. Rothenstein, an eminent painter, and Tagore’s friend who had stayed in Shantiniketan for some years before, persuaded the poet to let him have a look at the translation of the *Gitanjali* poems. An overwhelmed Rothenstein made efforts to show the translation to the noted Irish poet William Butler Yeats ( a later Nobel laureate). Having gone through the scribbled notebook translation, Yeats too was deeply moved over the translation.

The poems ultimately caused Yeats to write the famous “Introduction” to the published English version of the *Gitanjali* which was brought out in September 1912 by the Indian Society in London. London literary circle was no less captivated by the uniqueness of these poems. This sensational work created a stir with regard to the brilliance, the

graceful cadence, philosophic depth and a spiritual composure. The poems held up before the seasoned English readers endowed with a vastly rich literary legacy.

Yeats had no qualms to write in his introduction to the *Gitanjali*:

“This prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years ....to read one line of his is to forget all the troubles of the world.” He further showered encomiums by saying: “we have other poets, but none that are his equal.”<sup>i</sup>

### **Main Study:**

Tagore was primarily a visionary . His vision of men centered around a new world order and a global culture he envisaged even in that distant past. Tagore aspired to embrace multiculturalism, philanthropy, tolerance and peaceful co-existence to be attained through altruism. Tagore’s vision of a free India—free from the fetters of materialism, nationalism as well as religious and racial orthodoxy—actively seeking a common destiny with the rest of mankind, constantly evolving towards a global society, is most ardently and expressly expressed in the following poem in *Gitanjali*, written in the form of a application:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action—  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.<sup>ii</sup>

Here Tagore defines Freedom as a fundamental system of reasoning of a sovereign state of mind, established or accepted as a guide for governing the man in a nutshell. A freedom fixes the limits and defines the relations of the moral, ethical and powers of the state of mind, thus setting up the basis for life.

*Gitanjali* is a blend of a number of themes and ideas. Its hundred and odd lyrics explore the relationship between God and Man, individual and humanity. It justifies the ways of man to God and vice versa. It “expresses in perfect language permanent human impulses”, and thus passes the test of great poetry as laid down by T. S. Eliot. Here poetry has become a revelation, and incantation, like Vedic mantras and the poem as a whole opens the closed petals our lotus heart. It is an X’ray of inner reality. When the poem was composed India reeled under the ogre of the British rule. She passed through a rugged terrain laid with fear, falsehood, stifling restrictions, oppression and suppressed truth. The poet found around him fragmented existence and vicious social order imprisoned by sectarian, caste ridden “domestic walls” of disparity and disdain. Indians were not emancipated to express what they felt and whatever could come out of the “depth of truth”. This poem (No. 35, originally titled “Prarthana”) rings in a note of spiritual concord, and rings out all the narrow squeamishness, timidity, ritualistic

cobwebs of blind-folded movements -- eclipsing healthy judgments and burying sane human rationality under the quicksand of obscurantism. Tagore categorically disdained fragmentation of mankind. What the seer poet abhorred from the core of his heart was that a man's conscious being at all gets cut into the fragments of a self-centered, baffling and tainted false zest for life.

His voice is heard aloud:

“Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way onto the dreary desert send of dead habit.”<sup>iii</sup>

Tagore and Albert Einstein had been good friends. While Einstein developed his concept of cosmic religion, Tagore, on the other hand remained a worshipper of cosmic spiritual unification of human soul. He was under the influence of the “*Upanishads*”. It was possible for him to rise above the mundane, temporal and brittle considerations in relation to the essential ethos of life. Cosmic vision and earnest aspiration went through the laws of increasing returns with regard to his saintly poetic consummation. His vision refused to avow, as the poet expresses in this poem: “the world...broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.”<sup>iv</sup>

Tagore's vision led him to his philosophic height whenever the cosmic and the territorial get telescoped by the totalistic view of the world order. Peace and love had been the message of Rabindranath all his life through. He believed that:

“Until the big and powerful nations aided by their superiority and vast technological advancement, ceased their desire for territorial expansion and control over the smaller nations, world peace could never be achieved.”<sup>v</sup>

This particular poem under discussion reveals how the visionary Tagore fell foul of the untenable institutions adhering to all such ploys and pretext of caste, creed, colour, communal conventions, linguistic barriers and many such other stifling tethers, seriously detrimental to both the national as well as the cosmic human integration, Rabindranath aspired for. The poet expressed his vision in this poem :

“Where the mind is led forward by  
Thee into ever-widening thought and action.”<sup>vi</sup>

The ‘World of Freedom’, which Tagore envisions for his countrymen, can only be attained if we possess a fearless mind. Only a fearless mind can hold its head upright. So attain true freedom one has to have a mind which is ‘Without fear’. Thus, the poet wishes to be awakened to a heaven where the mind can work fearlessly and the spirit can hold its head high and again its knowledge is crystal clear reasoning. Tagore's oft quoted and oft-recited prayer is the sum and substance of humanism. According to Tagore, we can worship God only by loving and adoring the divinity in man. The most concrete and visible manifestations of the Supreme Being are men. We cannot comprehend the infinite nature of God. We can only sense Him through love and service to humanity. The true religion, therefore, ordains us to love humanity.

There could not be a greater humanistic steam than in the following lines :-

Where the mind is without fear and head is held high,  
Where knowledge is free, etc.

A free country means where one can acquire knowledge in all freedom of choice. The big world of man is fragmented or restricted to small mutually exclusive compartments. The poet preaches that our minds, instead of being engulfed in such prejudices and narrow superstitions, must be enriched by thoughts and actions, which are worthy and beneficial for the sake of the country:

*“Where the world has not been  
broken up into fragments by narrow  
domestic walls;  
Where words come out from  
the depth of truth;”*

In an ideal free country everybody speaks his/her heart clear, where actions flow in the form of various streams moving from success to success, where petty conventions do not stagnant the course of judgment. Tagore, entertains a system of thought that emphasizes the role of reason in obtaining knowledge. He also emphasizes the role of experience, especially sense perception. Tagore also attempts to tie various perceptions of the world together in some way. The comparative study of variegated knowledge would led to the reconstruction of a hypothetical parent Ideal to account for striking similarities among the various perceptions of East and west. Rabindranath’s vision had been crystallized on that ideal human situation, as he has said in this poem:

*“Where tireless striving stretches its  
arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason  
has not lost its way into the dreary  
desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by  
thee into ever-widening thought and  
action...”*

According to Rabindranath Tagore, attainment of ideal freedom was definitely an arduous but the most dreamy of situation in our country, in the pre-independent India. Studies commissioned by Tagore did determine with near certainty that declining moral values reflect cultural bias in the country, in the sense that post independent India scores such bloodshed in the name of religion. Here, Tagore remains an accurate predictor of Indian sociology. One must possess a fearless mind with one’s head hold high in self-esteem. Knowledge gained by the countrymen ought to be free from prejudices. The world should not become fragmented through internal strives and feuds. The mental make-up should be free from the superstitious, narrow and gloomy practices. The poet, finally, conceives of a situation, where the mind is guided by the Divine One to awaken ourselves from the errors of our commitments.

Tagore chose to uphold the message of the *Upánisháds* -- that exercised an indelible impact on Tagore’s entire being – that purity of purpose emanates from the purity of heart and of thought.

In his poem *Bharat Tirtha* the poet offered his tribute to the “Nara Devta” (human gods) with folded hand veneration. The poet’s powerful mind refused to be paralyzed bearing the brunt of the divide-and-rule policy of the wily British rulers endangering, polluting and poisoning the air of altruism – which this seer poet considered to be the *sine-qua-non* of the lives of the home sapiens ordained to be lived on earth.

In the original Bengali version Tagore prayed earnestly before the Almighty Father to categorically “hit (*aghat*) hard the Indian ethos with His merciless (*nirdaya*) hands” to turn her into “the heaven of freedom”.

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Tagore’s ever-growing, spiraling aspiration registered a strong conviction that essential human expression must “come out from the depth of truth”.

### **Conclusion:**

What Rabindranath underscores in this poem No. 35 is his idealistic vision and an undaunted aspiration for continuous urge for ideal action that should permeate the gentle tenor of individualistic human soul, to turn it into a spiritually illumined entity, seen through the prism of Truth and Love – so much so that “jeevan devta” merges with “viswa devta” under the glow of a spiritual enlightenment.

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### **References**

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<sup>i</sup> Ibid., p. 49-50

<sup>i</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>i</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>i</sup> Kalyan Kundu, (2010) Rabindranath Tagore and World Peace, *ASIATIC*, Vol. 4., No. 1., June, p.77.